No Time to Die

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by GracefulFalcon

Summary

Having convinced Hannibal to face his past in his homeland of Lithuania, Will wants nothing more than to be there for the older man. Hannibal is overwhelmed with being forced to re-live his childhood trauma, which strains their relationship. Through a surrealist lens, the murder husbands navigate overcoming past trauma as well as incorporating the less palatable aspects of their relationship into their casual domesticity.

This is part two of a separate work, but you do not need to have read that to understand this one.

Notes

Hey guys! I took a much longer break than planned, but I have to say that it was definitely needed. I needed time to take my exams, perform in my dance show, and graduate high school. It's been pretty stress-free for me recently (aside from the asshole who hit my car you motherfucker-), so I finally got around to writing a sequel. I'm taking a different approach this time around, so I hope you enjoy the longer chapters. On to the story!

All of Our Dark Dreams

Will lifts his gaze to rest on the elaborate iron gate guarding the entrance to the Lecter Estate. Hannibal's family crest adorns the peak where both sides of the gate meet, standing unwavering despite the years gone by. He watches silently as Hannibal reaches to peel back an overgrown vine from the faded placard resting at eye level. Squinting his eyes, Will is just able to make out the smudged words: "LECTER" and "DVORAS". Hannibal's hand drops silently, leaving the vine hanging animatedly in the air, half attached to the junction of the gate, half floating. In a display of vulnerability that Will had not been expecting, Hannibal tips his head down and leans forward, resting his forehead on the sign. He had not taken the time to gel it back like usual, so a few loose strands fall across his forehead, creating a disheveled appearance that Will cannot help but feel endeared by. While it took him longer than he is proud of to recognize that he was attracted to Hannibal, he always saw the man as generally attractive. While he will never admit it aloud, he thinks Hannibal is quite beautiful in his own way.

Not knowing what else to do, Will continues to stand at what he hopes is a respectful distance. He wants to be present in case Hannibal needs him, but he does not want to crowd him either. It is a difficult balance to maintain, but Will is not one to shy away from a task merely because it is difficult. He would not be here otherwise. He is well aware that their return to Hannibal's childhood home will be laced with pitfalls. What little he knows of the man's childhood is far from pleasant, and he doubts he knows the full extent of it. There is a chance Hannibal himself does not know. When faced with a traumatic experience before one is able to compartmentalize it and process it properly, those memories are more often than not repressed. Hannibal admitted as much when he told Will about all of the locked rooms in the basement of his memory palace.

"Hannibal," he finally whispers, breaking the spell of silence that had overcome them. Hannibal gives no verbal acknowledgement, but he drops to his knees to retrieve a pair of wire cutters from his bag. How Hannibal managed to get them without him noticing, Will has no idea, but they prove to be more than effective against the brittle lock keeping each side of the gate together. A rich creaking sound emanates from the hinges, cutting through the air like a sharp blade. It feels like a warning. Until now, Will had not taken the time to properly take in the estate, but he does exactly so as he follows Hannibal into the mouth of whatever awaits them inside. He takes such slow, delicate steps. Will would call them fearful were it anyone else, but with Hannibal, the most adequate word would be cautious. Fear is too base an emotion to ever quantify anything that fleets over his face.

The distant horizon betrays a severe, gothic-style castle seemingly looming above the rest of the grounds. The turrets pierce the sky like the tip of a cutlass, standing rigidly in formation. While the wind is not exactly biting–not yet–it is enough to tinge the tips of Will's ears pink as he trails Hannibal up the downtrodden path. He takes notice of the overgrown shrubbery, the scattered black aspen and birch trees littering the border of the property likely meant to discourage prying eyes. Despite the unkempt exterior, Will considers how beautiful this place once was. He visualizes the turrets covered in a thick blanket of snow, the path maintained by purposeful shoes, the sound of life echoing through the halls. There is a never-ending well of

questions he wishes he could ask, but he knows better than to provoke Hannibal now. Any other person would not bat an eye at the man walking before him, but Will can not help but notice the minute stiffening of shoulders or the light quickening of their pace. He glances to the right of the path only for his eyes to immediately settle on a small patch of land surrounded by an iron fence, similar to the one encompassing the estate except it only comes up to about hip height rather than the towering expanse of the main gate. Wild grasses and other foliage snake around the tombstones. Life defying death. The tombstones appear to be in varying degrees of disrepair, but he cannot make out the finer details from this distance. Will feels drawn to it for some reason, feeling as if the significance of it is at the tip of his tongue, barely out of the grasp of his fingers. Of course. Mischa. Even if there was nothing left of her to bury, he knows Hannibal would have given her a proper funeral, at least in some capacity. The strings on the edge of his consciousness tug him toward the graveyard, but he cuts those intuitions free.

The pair swiftly reach a house at the base where the land becomes thick with trees and begins to incline, leading up to the manor. The house itself is quaint compared to the castle that lies beyond, but it still holds that air of mystique and wisdom that older European buildings often do. Will attempts to gather any information he can about what might lie in wait within the walls of the building, but the window panes are so clouded with dust and grime that seeing inside is nigh impossible, so instead, he turns to Hannibal in question. The man has not uttered a word since they set foot on the outside of the iron gate, a pattern which he continues. Instead, he beckons Will toward the door. Unsure of what to do, Will eyes the intricate designs of the handle. Surely the house is deserted? He tries pressing down on the jamb, but it remains stubbornly in place. Maybe it's just old, he thinks to himself, leaning his weight against the frame in an effort to force it open. He stands back upright, exasperated. Steeling himself to try again, he takes a step back, closes his eyes, and breathes in deeply. When he opens his eyes anew, he is greeted with the end of a riffle.

"Hannibal. . ." he begins, slowly turning his head to where Hannibal stood mere moments ago only to find the spot completely devoid of any trace of the man.

"Look at me." The modulated voice of the woman before him pulls him back into the moment. "You're trespassing," she accuses. "This rifle has a three-pound pull. I am holding two of it." The statement is matter-of-fact, as if confused Americans randomly materialize on her doorstep every week. Will raises his arms away from his body, proving that he does not come with malicious intent.

"I'm unarmed. My name is Will Graham," he supplies, stalling in an effort to figure out how he can get out of this situation.

"You know Hannibal?" When Will raises an eyebrow she clarifies. "You said his name."

He doubts that explaining that they are actually engaged would help matters. Besides, if she knows Hannibal well enough to reside in his childhood home then the prospect of the man being engaged to anyone may be unbelievable, which would cause more harm than good. He decides on a vague, halfway answer.

"One could argue we know each other intimately." He watches as the woman lowers her weapon by a fraction.

"Nakama?" she queries. "It's the Japanese word for a very close friends."

"Yes, you could say we are nakama." He attempts to lower his arms, but the woman lifts her weapon again, so he remains still. "I brought him here." A flicker passes over her features so quickly that he thinks he might have imagined it. "So he can remember," he finishes, pausing to lick his lips. "We construct fairy tales, and we accept them. Our minds concoct all sorts of fantasies when we don't want to believe in something."

"You wish to understand him." It is not a question, but Will nods anyway. The woman returns her weapon to a resting position and beckons for him to follow her.

They enter the house, lengthy shadows cast by the dim light decorating the walls. To his surprise, the woman begins leading him down a staircase. The tile floor is filthy, littered with gnawed bones, dust, and snails. Even the air feels cooler, more stifling than upstairs. The woman gestures to the end of the hall, and Will's gaze finds purchase on a grate with small dolls made of twine decorating the outside. A pair of hands materialize from the depths of the darkness, bony fingers wrapping around the bars of the grate. Upon further inspection, he sees that they belong to a filthy man, his hair wild and matted. What can be seen of his face reveals protruding cheekbones and hollow eyes. The woman silently moves past him, extending her arm towards the man, and Will notices the small package carefully held in her gloved hand. The prisoner tears it away from her, untying the string to reveal what appears to be poultry of some sort. He begins murmuring something under his breath, and when that fails to achieve his intended result, he reaches out through the bars, grasping toward Will and repeating his earlier ramblings.

"What is he saying?" Will asks, turning to face the woman as he addresses her.

"He wants you to look at him, speak to him," she explains, but when he turns back to the man, she adds sharply, "but you're not going to." The room around them fades away to a single color. The three of them stand amidst blood-streaked walls, the viscous liquid pooling at his feet, coating his shoes in the coppery stench.

"Well, you've–er–cast aside the social graces normally afforded to human beings," he accuses. Her once deep brown eyes turn the color of ash, the crimson of the room reflected on her sclera, dancing like twin flames burning whatever crosses their path to the ground.

"He's cast them aside." Her eyes gleam. "All he's allowed is the sound of water. It is what the unborn hear. It's their last memory of peace." The trickle of water grounds pierces through Will's mind. The blood, the fire and ash, all dissolve before him as he is returned to the basement of the ancient house.

"You're keeping him like an animal," he spits. He does not exactly care for the man's fate one way or another, but his goal is to antagonize her. To push her and see how far she can bend before breaking. She knows Hannibal and must therefore be acquainted with the game of push and pull, so Will wants to see just how well she can play.

"I wouldn't do this to an animal," is all she allows him before turning away and retreating upstairs. He smiles when he realizes that she is forcing his hand. He must follow her if he wants answers, and the house is her territory. He is an intruder upon her domain. Will decides

that the need for answers is greater than anything else at the moment, besides, even if he knew where Hannibal went, the likelihood of him successfully navigating the grounds is slim.

The suffocating quality of the basement dissipates almost fully when he reaches the living area. The interior of the house itself falls in line with what little Will has seen of Eastern European architecture, but the adornings and details all appear Japanese in nature. The clouded windows do not allow for a great amount of natural light to filter into the room, but a few lamps cast a warm, low light that illuminates the face of the woman. She sits on a cushion at a table with a cup of tea. Its twin rests on the other end of the table, clearly awaiting him, so he sits carefully, making sure to fold his legs lest his knees knock against the table. When it is clear she will not speak, he takes the cup in both hands, but before he lifts it to his lips, he asks.

"What did he do?"

"He ate her," comes the reply. Although there is likely only one significant 'her' in all of this, he continues to play the game. The pieces must all be spread out and aligned, and that requires patience.

"Mischa?" At the minuscule tilt of her chin, he continues. "How long has he been your prisoner?"

"We've been each other's prisoner. . .for a very long time." The answer is unexpected, and Will cannot help the light widening of his eyes. Not that he had expected the actual answer to be anything else, but it is the honesty that startles him.

"However did you find yourself in this situation?" He finally takes a sip of the tea. It is woodsy, lightly aromatic. A green blend of some sort.

"That question applies to both of us," she smiles, a disconcerting expression given the context. He is about to argue that Hannibal is not his prisoner and neither is he Hannibal's, but that is not entirely true. There is no one else but them. Not even Abigail could share in what they have because it is so destructive. In order to rebuild a house one must tear the first one down. The statement has shaken him more than he wishes to let on, so he takes another sip to fill the hanging silence. He considers how the woman likely prevented Hannibal from killing the man in the basement, but there is a predatory quality to her, this exchange has proven that.

"What's your name?" he decides to ask. "Quid pro quo. You know mine, but I do not know yours. That hardly seems fair."

"Chiyoh."

"How do you know it was your prisoner who killed Mischa?" Her face remains impassive, but he feels the emotions flickering through her. There is pain, guilt, *doubt.*

"Hannibal told me so," comes the modulated reply, almost rehearsed, as if she has been repeating it in her head for years. Chiyoh may not have seen Hannibal in years, and he is

uncertain if she saw him before he disappeared from her doorstep, but she knew him before, while he lived here, which means she may have a clue as to where he has run off to.

"Do you know where he is?" He finishes his tea, and she reaches for the teapot to pour him a second cup.

"Why are you looking for him? After he left you. . ." she trails off. Will's chest rises as he takes a deep breath and closes his eyes.

"I've never known myself as well as I know myself when I'm with him." His tone is purposeful, but instead of meeting Chiyoh's questioning gaze, he peers out the window, appearing lost in thought. The dim light permeating the room flickers, casting his features in a harsh shadow. It feels significant, somehow.

"I cannot help you find him." Chiyoh stands and picks up the tray with the china, making her way to the kitchen with no indication of whether or not he should follow. "Hannibal wanted to kill that man for what he did to Mischa. I wouldn't let him take his life, so Hannibal left his life with me."

"He was curious if you would kill," Will observes, rising to his feet but making no effort to follow her.

"I imagine he still is."

The encounter has left Will shaken, but it has also awakened a new resolve in him. He is aware of Hannibal's devious machinations, his past experiments. Randall Tier, Bedelia, Abigail, and likely many others Will will never know about. Chiyoh is simultaneously like them as well as anything but. Yes, Hannibal was curious if he could kindle the embers of violence within her, but there is something else, something that Will cannot quite place. It feels warm, almost kind, a warm golden glow filling the oppressive atmosphere.

The sun begins to set, drenching the trees and surrounding grounds in liquid gold as he begins to make his way up to the manor proper. He contemplates how the sprawling expanse of nature should remind him of his little house in Wolf Trap, but that could not be further from the truth. There is something distinctly primeval about it. The looming branches part like the red sea as if welcoming him home after a long and tiresome journey. Following the path carved for him, he listens to the crunch of the detritus beneath his boots, the low cawing of the crows nesting in the thicket of trees. His journey reaches its conclusion well after the sun has set as he has taken the time to learn the nature of the world that exists here. To learn the land that forged the man he now seeks. The line of trees breaks into a clearing, revealing a long-empty fountain. Will kneels at the lip of the stone structure, eyes drawn by the red handprint decorating it. He gently brushes away the foliage with a gloved hand. The difference between his own appendage and the size of the print is striking. The handprint was obviously made by a child, and a young child at that. It is red in color, but it is not blood. Blood would have washed away with time, possibly leaving behind a brown stain, but the red paint remains mostly unweathered by time and the elements. He traces the edges of the handprint, where the edges have become less clear.

A child, young and carefree–happy even–squeals as she runs through a well-maintained garden. She stops at the fountain, panting as she turns her head to each side in search of her brother. Content that she has lost him, she sits on the lip of the fountain, kicking her legs out in delight at her deception, a finger absentmindedly twirling her blonde curls. A few minutes pass, and the girl crosses her arms in frustration, jumping off of the edge of the fountain to go find her silly brother that must have forgotten about her. A blur, quick as a cat, lunges at her and tackles her to the ground before she can scream.

"Aš turiu tave," laughs the older boy, his light ash hair glinting in the sun as he holds his sister to him. She frowns, her upper lip curling into an unmistakable pout.

"Ne! Aš turiu tave!" she cheers, wrapping her small arms around her brother.

Will straightens his legs and hauls himself to his feet. The sculpture perched on the head of the fountain glares at him, and he gazes back in defiance. The words of the painter in the corn fields echo in his mind. *There is no God.* With that attitude, certainly not. Will never found himself one to divest himself for the sake of religion, not a pious or devout man in any sense of the word. If some version of God existed somewhere, then so be it. He never bothered God, and so far, God never bothered him. Besides, the only god he will ever worship is Hannibal Lecter.

He does not bother to enter through the main entrance, assuming it will be locked, so he snakes around to a side entrance that appears reserved for servants. The manor itself is overgrown with moss and vines, clearly abandoned for the last however many decades, but as Will approaches the door, he finds a key left in the keyhole, as if awaiting his imminent arrival. He quickly chastises himself for the thought as obviously, this is how Hannibal himself entered earlier after he slipped away. Nevertheless, Will hesitates before crossing the threshold. He has not been expressly invited inside, and he could be violating a potential boundary in doing so, but on the other hand, Hannibal never acts within the confines of socially acceptable behavior, so why should he adhere to them?

His step echoes as he enters, his boots sounding against the stone floor. He finds himself within the servants' passageways, so he follows the stairs up to the third floor where the rooms are smaller and more personal. He coughs as his footfalls lift up layers of dust, clouds billowing in the cooling air. Despite the disrepair, he cannot argue against the beauty of the manor. Even now in darkness, the stone bricks, high arches, and elaborate carvings are hauntingly enchanting. Elaborate tapestries and paintings decorate the walls, making it clear that this part of the manor had likely never been ransacked or taken apart by anyone. Good. He wants to witness Hannibal's past as uninterrupted as possible. As he continues down the resplendent halls, he attempts to imagine a young Hannibal running through them, a smile on his face, but he quickly banishes the thought. Even though he never witnessed the events himself, he can feel the pain etched into every fiber of this place. The voices cry out to him, pleading, but for what he cannot say. An inky wave of smoke begins to overcome him, filling his lungs and spilling out of his eyes in potent tears. He allows the substance to carry him away as he leaves his consciousness behind and wades into a pool of impenetrable liquid.

His eyes flutter open, the warm colors of the orchard in Italy welcoming him. It is autumn again, and the leaves are a brilliant array of yellow, red, and orange. Nature dropped her

cans of paint and left the spectacle where it stands, leaving it for Will to discover here in this in-between. His feet move forward of their own accord, navigating him deeper into the thicket. For all intents and purposes, he could be going anywhere, so he averts his gaze to his hands and marvels at how they shimmer and ripple along with his thoughts. This is his mind palace. He is in control, and he knows exactly where it is his feet are taking him. The ancient tree with the snaking roots stands tall and proud, exactly as it did almost a year ago when he last witnessed it in all its glory. He shifts his attention from the tree itself to the man standing before it like a devout man before his God. His hands are clasped behind his back in a facsimile of how he often did when pacing his office in Baltimore. The strands of Hannibal's ashen hair blow delicately in the wind, a light color to his cheeks. His back is toward Will, so the younger man endeavors to join him at his side, but his limbs suddenly become molten, his movements honey, and he is melting, crumbling into a puddle at the foot of the great tree. A pair of perfectly polished dress shoes materializes by his side, joined by the man wearing them. Hannibal leans over Will, his pin-straight hair spilling from behind his ear, but his skin is ashen, his eyes glazed over in death. The ghost of Garrett Jacob Hobbs lives on, and Will screams. He screams, but there is no air in his lungs because he is being buried alive in Mischa's grave, the Earth taking back what was once hers and suffocating him.

When he comes to, it is unclear how many hours have passed as he meandered the halls of his mind palace. The birds have long since discarded their melancholy song, and the night grows darker still. He finds himself huddled against the door with his knees drawn up to his chin, preserving his body heat in the face of the cold. He takes stock of his surroundings, noting the low bed in the corner of the room, opposite a small fireplace. Bookshelves line one of the walls, filled with leather-bound copies. The titles are an assortment of Italian, French, German, English, and what he assumes must be Lithuanian as those are the most populated. On the lowest shelf lie a dozen matching books, bound in canvas instead of leather. Will stoops to retrieve a random one, pausing as he opens it because the pages of handwritten notes are unmistakable. Even all of these years ago, Hannibal's penmanship was a thing of beauty, albeit less refined. The memory of how he deciphered Hannibal's note in the hospital because of the shape of the letters brings a smile to his face, and he sighs as he realizes how that ache of missing him is beginning to return. He closes the book, hesitant to infringe on this aspect of Hannibal's privacy regardless of the fact that he cannot read a word of the contents, and returns it to its rightful place on the shelf. A magnetizing feeling spreads through him like an icy cold, pulling him away from this room.

He follows the tugging sensation back through the corridor, almost doubling back on his original steps, but instead of turning back into the servants' passageways he opens an ornate wooden door, and steps out onto a landing lined with a marble balustrade. A grand staircase attaches itself to the landing, leading into the ballroom proper, because it is a ballroom. Three stories of windows decorate the western wall, allowing for the golden light to seep in during the evenings, but in the darkness of night, the hall is illuminated with the flickering light of a thousand candelabras. Rows of family portraits hang solemnly on the opposite wall, cataloging the descendants of the Lecter family like a simplified family tree. Will marvels at how the floor glitters, how the light from the candles dances over the various stylizations of the hall, but when he blinks the only light is that of the moonlight streaming in through the tall window panes. He spots a figure huddled in the middle of the floor, their back turned to him. He descends the marble staircase, taking in his surroundings for a second time as he

notices how some of the paintings are missing or torn and how the candles have long since melted away.

Out of a last-minute sense of caution, he unsheathes the knife Hannibal gave him during their train journey to Lithuania, gripping the handle in his right hand as he approaches the hunched form. As he approaches, his eyes fall on a dark liquid coating the surrounding floor, pooling around his feet. Blood. The coppery scent assaults his nostrils with every step as he angles his approach slightly to the right. Best to not approach Hannibal–for it has to be Hannibal–from the back. He dexterity resheaths the knife still clutched between his fingers. Escalation with Hannibal is suicide, but he places it in his pocket all the same. Finally close enough to the scene to properly see in the dim light, Will crouches beside Hannibal, his nose telling him as much as his eyes how the man is absolutely covered in blood, much of it long since congealed against his clothes. Will watches, entranced, as the former surgeon nimbly maneuvers the scalpel across the body's flesh, stripping his skin away. His heart has long since stopped beating, so the small rivulets of blood are barely noticeable as the scalpel severs capillaries. Almost every inch of the man is somehow sliced open or peeled away, save for his face, which remains hauntingly clean in the face of the surrounding carnage.

"Hannibal. . ." he begins, but the man before him does not acknowledge his presence, completely engrossed in his task. It is strange in a way. Will had spent so long worrying about what he would do if Hannibal killed again and what that would mean for their safety. So many dreamless nights spent agonizing over it, but now that it has happened, all he feels is a sense of peace and overwhelming relief at finding the man before him. "Please," he tries again, but to no avail. Closing his eyes and letting out a sigh of frustration, Will extends a hand to cup Hannibal's cheek and tilts his face toward him, practically forcing Hannibal to look at him. Will looks into his eyes, feeling the far-away nature of his feelings. Although physically, Hannibal is here, mentally he is far away, roaming someplace in his memory palace, somewhere safer than here. Looking closer, Will notices the tightness around his eyes characteristic of dried tears and echoes the words seemingly from a lifetime ago. "Stay with me." There is no response, but it is not like he expected one, so he reaches for the scalpel still clasped in Hannibal's hand and pries it away from stiff fingers. Setting the scalpel aside, he slides closer to him, wrapping his arms around Hannibal's torso as he begins to stand. Hannibal is still not fully present in reality, but at least he can stand of his own accord. Will is not certain that he would be able to carry him, especially the distance he has in mind.

Nevertheless, he snakes an arm around Hannibal's chest and holds him close as they ascend the stairs together. Despite it being barely a day of separation, Will feels so much more at peace simply having Hannibal by his side again, regardless of the fact that he is soaked in another man's blood. They come to a halt in one of the guest rooms where Will unceremoniously deposits him on the floor by the empty fireplace.

"Wait here for me, please," he says, caressing Hannibal's cheek with his thumb. The blank stare remains, but those fiery eyes hold recognition, so at least he knows who Will is.

Will busies himself with gathering kindling for the fire and bringing up water from the well next to the servants' entrance. The night is not exactly frigid, but it is less than comfortable, and a fire, as well as a warm bath, would be preferable to the alternative. After building up the fire and filling the bath in the adjoining room, he saunters over to where Hannibal lies on

his side, legs splayed out, watching the flickering fire with a detached interest. He kneels down once again, placing a timid hand on Hannibal's shoulder.

"Come on," he urges, but the man does not even twitch. Will has seen this response to trauma a few times before. The inability to move, to speak, even to breathe properly sometimes. To avoid processing the overwhelming emotions, the body shuts down, creating a feeling of encompassing numbness. Steeling himself for the effort, he slings Hannibal's arm over his shoulder and pulls Hannibal to his feet. He bends his knees and drapes his body over his shoulder, straightening with some effort. Hannibal is taller than him, and it has been a rough past few months for him, so he is not exactly in the best shape to be carrying another person around, but he cannot leave Hannibal in his current state. Will takes the few steps to the bathroom carefully, breathing heavily as he sets Hannibal down on the wooden chair he retrieved from the corner earlier.

The overcoat is the first to go. Will deems it possibly salvageable–only due to the chocolate brown color that would hide any residual staining–and deposits it to the side. Hannibal's button-down is another story. Will fumbles with the buttons for a minute or two before abandoning the endeavor and ripping it open. The buttons ping across the tile floor, yet Hannibal still provides no evidence that he acknowledges anything around him, so Will continues peeling back the shirt that is glued to his chest by the congealed blood. Next go his shoes, which are quickly followed by his socks. The process of taking off a sitting man's pants when he is not in the mood to be helpful is a much more difficult task than Will would think, but he manages it. His celebration is abruptly cut off when he realizes that he has to make a decision as to whether or not he should take Hannibal's boxers off for him. On one hand, it would be a bit strange to take a bath with clothes still on, but on the other hand, this is not something that they discussed, and Will is belatedly regretful that they never have. Somehow, Hannibal manages to notice his hesitance, as he dips his head by barely a millimeter. Will repeats the process with the pants, and it is easier this time around. Without giving his body the ability to hesitate, he scoops Hannibal up by the knees and transfers him into the warm water.

The bath itself is a stand-alone ceramic structure, and by design, it is significantly larger than anything he ever owned in the United States, which allows the water to go up to about the middle of Hannibal's chest. Will pulls the chair closer to the edge of the tub and retrieves the soap as well as a washcloth he brought in his bag. Hannibal does not fight him when he takes his hand and begins to scrub away at the congealed blood. He does it as gently as possible, but the blood has been allowed to dry, so he has to be rather vigorous to remove all traces of it. Despite the discomfort he is likely causing, he holds Hannibal's hand with a delicate reverence, lightly stroking his thumb across the palm of it. Dipping the washcloth in the water to rinse out the build-up, he glances up to find Hannibal looking at him. Not smiling, not moving, but looking nonetheless. He smiles and almost drops the washcloth. Recovering quickly, he lathers it with a new portion of soap, lifting it to Hannibal's face. Will gently runs it over the flecks marring his skin and ghosts his index finger over the sharp point of Hannibal's cheek. He shivers at the touch, closing his eyes as a single tear escapes from the corner of his eye. Will's eyes follow the bead of water as it curves around Hannibal's nose, his mouth, finally coming to rest at the point of his chin. Ever a force of curiosity, Will collects the droplet on the pad of his finger and lifts it to his lips. The tear tastes salty, but above all,

bitter, as if the reason for why it was shed has tarnished it, but he savors the flavor all the same.

Will continues his ministrations, lightly cleansing the grime from Hannibal's body until the water turns pink. His subject eventually opens his eyes and returns to regarding him with a closed-off intrigue, the emotions behind that beautiful face kept from him behind lock and key. The darkness of the night endures, and eventually, the water grows cold and nothing is left to be done. Will towels Hannibal off and helps him into a pair of cotton pajamas, the man barely more than dead weight in his arms. There are a few quilts in the dresser, which he shakes out to his best ability and drapes over the bed. Hannibal does not protest being tucked in like a child, and Will cannot help but smile with fondness; however, with him, any moments of vulnerability are often short-lived.

"Get out." With two single words, Hannibal's silence is broken as abruptly as it began. He whispers so quietly that Will is unsure if he heard him correctly.

"I can't hear you," he tries, so Hannibal repeats himself.

"Get. Out." This time the words cannot be denied, and Will balks in disbelief.

"I'm here to help you, Hannibal," he stutters. "I can't do that unless you let me." He tries to rest his hand on Hannibal's arm, but Hannibal shrugs away from the contact. He turns his face to the wall away from Will, but his voice remains clearly audible.

"Leave, Will. I do not wish to see or speak with you. Get. Out." Previously, the words were calm, emotionless, but still with an air of command about them, a quality Hannibal seems to always possess. This time, the emotion in them is unmistakable. The vitriol cuts through him as sharply as any knife, and he averts his head as if he had been physically slapped.

"How can you say that?" he practically shrieks, and the tears collecting in his eyes threaten to spill over. "After everything? Everything we have been through. Together." Hannibal still refuses to look at him. His voice shakes as he takes in another breath. "Do you even care, Hannibal? Do you even care about *us* ? Has there ever been an *us?* " He does not even know what he is saying, but the words fall out anyway. All of his insecurities and doubts laid bare, because what if it all had been a lie? More of Hannibal's manipulations? He expects Hannibal to deny it, to at least say something, but he just *lays there* and does not move. Sobering up, Will sniffs and hastily rakes his hand across his face, smearing the tears flowing freely from his eyes. "Fine. Goodbye, Hannibal," he spits, tearing his coat off of the chair where he left it before stepping out the door.

He practically sprints down the marble staircase, foregoing any attention to where he is putting his feet. He is about to do something reckless, and Hannibal is not here to stop him. If he wants to reignite their game, that is his prerogative. Will has unfinished business with the body in the middle of the ballroom.

What Will has in empathy, he also has in sympathy, which is why his work for Jack destroyed him so completely. Hannibal Lecter does not have an ounce of sympathy in his body. The reason why no one had been able to see through Hannibal until Will is because contrary to

popular belief, the Chesapeake Ripper was never a psychopath unable to empathize. On the contrary, Hannibal has always had empathy. However, he has always been in control of his emotions and able to choose how to feel. He understands the spectrum of emotions, but unlike Will, he also has complete control over emotions. He is able to compartmentalize, to lock them away somewhere safe for later use so that he can continue unobstructed. The last time he lost control of his emotions was shortly after Mischa's death. It was not the hunger, the cold, or the torture, but the pain of her death that had almost killed him. That very pain is what is about to crash over him like a wave finally cresting on the beach. Knowing what it did to him all those years ago, as well as what he does about Will's empathy, he could not bear to watch Will suffer with him. So Hannibal did what he does best and he twisted the knife and hurt Will. He hurt Will just enough to make him leave, but not enough to break him. What they have, what they share, that may be broken, or at the very least chipped, but if he lost Will now. . . the thought is unthinkable.

The second he can no longer detect Will's scent in the air, he lets go. He lets go of all of the barricades he was holding up, allowing the feelings that have been threatening him from the second he stepped foot in this wretched place to overrun his defenses. It is less so a rush of feeling than a dilation of the empty caverns that already exist within him. That ache deep within his core begins to bleed outward like a blot of ink, spreading out into his extremities until he begins to shiver. Although he is warm now, the cold of memories seeps into his bones, and he tugs his legs to his chest, a mirror image of the boy huddled in the basement beside his sister's dying body. The visual of Mischa slowly growing cold as her skin turned blue is forever etched upon the inside of his eyelids. It haunts him in his sleep in the late hours of the night. What never fails to surprise him every time is how pallid her skin is, how absolutely drained of color the once vibrant young girl appears, and it is not the fault of the memory or the light because the dotting of bruises encircling both their ankles is as vivid as ever, a motley of purple and green. Maybe this memory tips the scales, or possibly the location is a trigger, but the locks of the rooms hidden away in the deepest recesses of his memory palace break open, and all of the memories he worked so tirelessly to suppress appear before his eyes fresh as ever. As much as it pained him to do so, he is glad that he sent Will away when he begins to sob, convulsions raking through his body as tears fall unobstructed.

Packing up a body into a duffel bag is easier said than done, especially when the subject has been almost completely skinned and significantly bled. Will recalls how he and Hannibal transported Randall Tier's corpse to the museum, but that was different. He had kept a significant part of the man in his freezer, and they were able to cut him into pieces before moving him. His plan requires the body to be intact in its entirety, and he does not have the time to reattach limbs on site. He is finally able to fold everything in a way that does not telegraph that he is lugging around a dead body and wipes the sweat that has begun to accumulate on his brow. He makes his way out of the Lecter estate and to the small church they passed on their way.

One thing Will has always marveled at throughout his escapades in Europe are the churches and cathedrals. Never having been a religious man himself, he can still appreciate the haunting beauty of these places, mesmerized by the stained glass and vaulted ceilings. As Lithuania is a widely Catholic country, he is unsurprised by the richly adorned decorations

hanging throughout the space. His sweeping gaze lands on a crucifix on clear display. The planks of wood appear sturdy and well-made, and while it is likely not-to-scale compared with the real thing, it is large enough to support a grown man. Will delays little time and dives into the work, moving quickly but purposefully.

In the time it took him to drag a body all the way over here, he had more than enough time to process his conversation with Hannibal. The anger at the other man is still present, but it has diminished upon inspection. He needs to remember that this is a difficult time for Hannibal, that making progress will be a long and arduous process, but it also does not give him the right to act how he did. Then again, neither of them has ever done *this* before. Will is not even sure what exactly "this" is. Yes, they are in a relationship–of sorts–but it is more complicated than that. Normal people do not have the capacity to kill or be killed by their fiance in the way that they do. He doubts that he could actually do the deed, but hurting him? If he had to, he would. This is a way of clearing his head and of potentially making Hannibal understand.

Will reaches into his bag to retrieve the supplies that he brought with him, but the rope transforms into vines and the nails become thorns before his eyes. The candles illuminating the church flicker as if a light breeze has disturbed them even though the doors and windows are all sealed shut. As if unimpeded by the constraints of his human form, Will hoists the man onto the cross, encompassing his wrists and ankles with the fibrous green tendrils. His hands recognize the familiar shape of a fisherman's knots as he makes quick work of attaching the limp body to the cross. His design is coming together, but it is missing the elements of a proper crucifixion. He drives the thorns through flesh and bone with the blunt end on a candlestick holder, nailing hand and foot to the wooden panel. The man no longer bleeds, dark threads of liquid pooling where the thorns bury themselves.

By some stroke of fortune, there is a small garden in the back of the church. Lavender blue hydrangea hugs the outer walls of the building, their stalks a bright green in contrast to the cracked stone bricks. The small bells of lily of the valley sprout up in small patches, like dewdrops decorating moss-covered roots in the morning light. Hydrangea for frigidity and heartlessness, but also gratitude for being understood. Lily of the valley for tears of the Virgin Mary. Taking out his knife, he cuts the stems of the flowers, gathering enough to complete his design. Will weaves the fibrous parts together, directing the buds outward into a crown. His sacrifice will wear a crown of flowers instead of a crown of thorns.

Will steps back to admire his completed work, the crucifix barely illuminated by the moonlight streaming in through the stained glass windows. Frigidity. Heartlessness. Sacrifice. Rebirth and redemption. The motifs float around his head like whispered tendrils of thought attempting to pierce through the veneer of his mind. They buzz incessantly, a cloud of flies taking the shape of a man, but this time it is not Garrett Jacob Hobbs but Hannibal in all his glory. It is him at the same time it isn't. A crown of antlers adorns his head, not reaching for the sky but challenging it instead. Ebony wings stretch out behind him, forming puddles of a void black as hell itself as they drip liquid onto the cobbled floor. The sludge runs in the veins in between each stone, tearing through the maze like an all-encompassing fog. Will falls to his knees, unable to stand any longer, and the creature tilts its head curiously. It reaches out and presses at the bottom of his chin, forcing his head up. The cold whisper of fog tickles his jaw, and he meets its gaze.

Come back to me.

The words echoing in his head are as much his and Hannibal's. It makes sense. They are conjoined, their selves began to blur long ago. Taking one last look at his design, he cleans the scene, packing everything away in the bag before he heads out through the side door he entered through.

The return walk to the estate feels as if it takes twice as long, which is strange considering the absence of a body and the fact that return trips usually feel shorter if anything. He does not mind though as long stretches of time never bothered him. The time is easily spent in his head, considering, weighing his options. He does not exactly want to see Hannibal now, especially so soon, but something pulls him to that room on the third floor regardless. Hannibal knows how to strike, how to hurt him. He could dissect Will's psyche as easily as a cadaver, and Will could return the favor with similar ease. Their partnership is like a ticking bomb where if either one of them moves it means mutual destruction, and Will would not have it either way. Cannot be together, cannot be apart. Hannibal clearly wanted him to leave. He *wanted* him to be angry, and he left exactly like Hannibal wanted him to. If he is to play the game, he has to come back, while the element of surprise is still fresh.

The night has taken on a hazy quality. Whether that can be attributed to the early hour or Will's lack of sleep he refuses to consider. The now-familiar stairs greet him with a soft creak as he scales them to the third floor, a renewed purpose to his gait. He reaches out to turn the nob, but something stops him at the last second. A muffled sound escapes from the gap between the floor and the door, causing him to hesitate. He turns the handle and cautiously swings the door inward, wincing at the loud creak that telegraphs his presence, but when he sweeps the room for a sign of the man who kicked him out earlier, he comes up empty. An anguished sound breaks him out of his thoughts, which he follows to the other side of the bed only to find Hannibal on the floor with his knees tucked up to his chin, arms held close as his chest trembles with gasping sobs. His eyes are puffy and red from crying, and the tears have soaked the front of his shirt quite thoroughly. Will is at a complete loss. He has seen Hannibal cry, but never like this. All thoughts of mind games are immediately swept away as he looks at the man he loves gasping for breath on the floor while he stands there powerless to do anything about it.

"Hannibal. . ." he tries, and those piercing maroon eyes startle at the sound of his voice, a look of abject horror appears on Hannibal's face as plain as day. Will realizes that he is looming over him in his coat at a time when Hannibal is vulnerable. That word echoes through his mind. Vulnerable. Hannibal is never vulnerable, even when he is at a disadvantage, yet here he is. Will drops to his knees and slowly slides over to where Hannibal is curled up on himself. It is obvious that he is trying to stop the heaving of his chest, but he is actively failing in his endeavor.

"Hey," Will whispers, making shushing sounds as he reaches to cup Hannibal's cheek, letting his fingers hover just over skin in case Hannibal chooses to withdraw. "It's okay. Let it out," he encourages, and while Hannibal does not acknowledge his words, he leans into Will's hand, savoring the contact. Will pulls him into his arms, maneuvering Hannibal so that his head falls on Will's chest. Tentatively, he wraps an arm around Hannibal's back, holding him close, and cradles his head with the other. He whispers quietly, so quietly that he doubts that

the other man can even hear him, but he does it anyway. He tells Hannibal about old cases, some of them he solved, others that went unsolved, and even others that were solved later after new evidence came to light. Hannibal just cries in his arms and clings to him like a lifeline. It makes Will wonder if Hannibal has ever been held by anyone since his parents' deaths. He would not be surprised if the answer to that is no, but now is not the time to ask.

Eventually, he begins to worry that Hannibal will lose his voice, but the wretched sobs die down and he presses into Will almost to the point of pain. Hannibal's voice is raspy, and he speaks so quietly that Will has to strain to hear him.

"She was the best thing I had ever tasted," he breathes, and Will understands.

"You can't give back what you have taken," he replies, carding his fingers through Hannibal's hair. "But you don't want to, do you?"

"No," comes the answer he was expecting. "No, I don't."

"I know." Will kisses his forehead. "I know."

Those Who Dwell in the Night

Chapter Summary

"What have you done?"

"Nothing you wouldn't do."

Chapter Notes

Me? Posting another chapter of this after I said I was busy like two days ago? Imagine that. About half of this has been in the drafts since the summer, but I recently got inspired again and wanted to finish it. Originally my plans were for about 8k, like the last chapter, but I want to emphasize a few things and I'd rather keep them together. If there's a terrible tonal shift in the middle of this, I'm truly sorry, but I haven't even had the chance to proofread because uni is killing me.

Will cradles Hannibal in his arms until the sun chases the oppressive darkness away. Sunbeams break through the dusty windowpanes, the light creating a halo around the crown of Hannibal's head. The sobs have long since faded into distant echoes and the tears have dried, leaving nothing but tight skin in their wake, but Hannibal's grip on Will has not wavered throughout the night. Will listens to his shallow breaths, watching as Hannibal's head bobs with the rise and fall of his chest. To anyone else it would appear like he was asleep, but Will knows that the man curled up against him is more than aware of his surroundings. He tips his head down to whisper along the curve of Hannibal's ear, the movement startlingly intimate despite their shared physicality.

"I often forget that you're mortal," he admits. "Those years ago, when we first met, you were an impenetrable wall that I couldn't see over no matter how hard I tried. As I began to learn who you were–what you were–-that wall dissipated and, in its place, stood a lighthouse, solid brick and mortar in an ever-churning sea." Hannibal gives no acknowledgment save for the slight deepening of his breath. "You were always so omniscient," Will continues, his tone taking on a severe quality. Hannibal flinches at his next words. "It was why I couldn't believe that you loved me at first. But then, ever since that night in your kitchen, I see glimpses of you, not as the predator but as the man." He begins to smooth down the fabric of Hannibal's shirt. "Please don't be afraid to share that with me." Hannibal does not react, but Will did not expect him to. "Hey," he starts, tilting Hannibal's chin up with his fingers, "don't go inside, please look at me."

"Do not ask me to do that, Will." Hannibal's voice breaks, his vocal cords coated in tears, but the tone is sour. As if to make the point even more obvious, he withdraws from where he was resting against Will's chest and sits with his back against the bed, legs crossed under him. The early morning sunlight hits his face directly, creating an ethereal glow along the profile of his face. He looks like one of those Renaissance paintings, Will thinks. If only Renaissance paintings could compete with Hannibal's acerbic tongue. He squashes the anger threatening to rise up and overflow, banishing it away for the moment. He steadies himself, taking a breath in and closing his eyes before he opens them anew to speak.

"You're hurting me, Hannibal. Every time you withdraw, you're hurting me. I thought we were past pushing each other away." Hannibal blinks, a flicker of surprise flashing across his features before quickly turning into amusement. The light crinkling of his eyes causes the anger simmering beneath Will's skin to come to a boil, and he is about to open his mouth when Hannibal raises a placating hand to his wrist.

"You are truly remarkable, Will. With all my knowledge and intrusion, I could never entirely predict you. My goal was to make you angry, not to hurt you. It appears I have succeeded in the former, albeit at a much-delayed time than initially planned."

"Why would you want to make me angry?" The feelings of resentment fade as blatant curiosity fills their place.

"It appears unavoidable, so I might as well show you," Hannibal explains. He finally lifts his eyes to meet Will's, the sclera still glassy and reflective. Up until now, Will has been picking up on some of Hannibal's emotions. He feels them tugging at his stomach, an ever-encroaching presence. Most of the time, Will is able to differentiate what is his and what is not, but with Hannibal it takes considerable effort. They have begun to blur in more ways than one. Will remembers that morning when Hannibal peered into his eyes and bared his emotions, his pain, before him. It was all-encompassing, something tangible and physically painful. It was nothing compared to this. The tugging sensation in his stomach begins burning, like a hot knife twisting in his gut. He clutches at his abdomen, an inhuman cry escaping his lips, meanwhile Hannibal continues to gaze at him indifferently, the red embers of his eyes ablaze. "You wished to know, did you not?" he whispers. Will does not–cannot– reply as his vision blurs with unshed tears. The paralyzing awareness of *loss* overcomes him, and as he struggles to breath, he wonders how Hannibal survived this, how he continues to survive this.

"I did not survive it the first time, Will," Hannibal says, his voice a lifeline Will clutches onto in the impending darkness. "That boy died with Mischa. I am what remains." He seems to take pity on Will, who is now shivering against the onslaught of emotion affecting both of them and pulls him onto his lap. The position is a slight mimic of how Will had held him earlier, one arm curled around his chest, the other caressing his forehead. Hannibal presses his cheek to Will's, whispering inaudible reassurances against his skin.

"You shouldn't be comforting me," Will chokes out, but he leans into the touch, nonetheless. "These are your emotions, right? I'm just along for the ride." He does not bother pointing out that he basically asked for it. There is no point, Hannibal knows. The only response he is

graced with is an increase in pressure from the arm around him, pressing him even further against Hannibal's chest.

"Please, allow me this." His voice has changed. There is a certain wistful quality to the tone, and suddenly, Will understands. Hannibal was not able to save Mischa, the girl having slipped from his arms, but he can comfort Will.

"I'm not dying, Hannibal," he offers.

"I know." Hannibal smooths stray curls away from his forehead and kisses his cheek. It is not long before Will falls asleep in the gentle safety of Hannibal's embrace.

He wakes to find himself lying in the bed. A colorful quilt is draped over him, the corners snug around his shoulders. Straining his head to the side, he finds Hannibal sitting up against the headboard, having dressed for the day already.

"Do you even sleep?" Will mumbles through his sleep-laden tongue. It is still light outside, but the direct sunlight from the rising sun on this side of the estate is long gone. He slept until the afternoon, then.

"Of course I sleep," Hannibal chuckles as he playfully ruffles Will's hair. "I am human after all."

"Hmmmm yeah, right," Will grumbles, burying his face in Hannibal's side. "I wouldn't be surprised if you never even slept at all whenever Alana was staying over–" he quickly cuts himself off, blushing at the realization of what he is saying. Hannibal stiffens minutely, but otherwise remains unperturbed.

"I require little rest, Will. A remnant of my days as a surgeon." His voice is thoughtful, as if the actual answer is miles more complicated. Will is unconvinced.

"I don't doubt it helped you be a better surgeon, but what I do doubt is that the medical field was the catalyst for it." His voice is muffled from speaking into the fabric of Hannibal's shirt, but the older man understands him, nonetheless.

"Ever perceptive, as always," Hannibal muses, moving his hand away from Will's hair to rest between his shoulder blades. "It is a fool's errand, trying to hide from you."

"You never answered my first question," Will accuses.

"And what was that?" He feigns ignorance. He knows exactly what Will asked, but the temptation to force him to admit his curiosity is too much to forgo. Will grumbles in annoyance, clearly seeing through Hannibal's ploy, but his curiosity wins over.

"Did you ever sleep when Alana was with you?" Will's jealousy is clear in the acidic tone, and Hannibal savors the moment, locking the image away in his memory palace for later perusal.

"Do people not sleep beside their partners? If I remember correctly, the National Sleep Foundation guidelines advise that adults need between 7 to 9 hours every night." Upon hearing the word "partner", Will immediately turns over, disentangling himself from the quilt, and sits up, spine rigid. He is so *angry* , but he cannot pinpoint exactly why. Alana has done nothing deserving of such wrath, contrary to what Hannibal believes, yet the feeling remains, pulsating as alive as the arteries beneath his flesh. Hannibal stares him down, amusement evident in the slight upturn of his lips and crinkling of his eyes. A fraction of the anger redirects itself at the man before him, and Will is about to say something he may well regret when Hannibal interrupts him.

"Are you jealous, Will?"

"That's a loaded question." It is a loaded question because Will thinks he might actually be right. He *is* jealous. And to make matters worse, Hannibal realized that before he did. Embarrassment flushes across his cheeks, and he ducks his head away. "Well, you seem to already know," he whispers, unable to meet Hannibal's eyes.

"Do I?" comes the infuriating response, and if Will was not still fighting to remain awake, he would have tried to strangle him by now. Instead of violence, he decides to sit in silence until Hannibal finally gets the hint that the conversation will not go anywhere unless he ignites it himself. "Why are you jealous of Alana?" Will takes a shaky breath through his teeth. It's a good question. Why *is* he jealous of Alana?

"I don't know," he lies. Hannibal obviously is not buying it, but he takes pity on Will.

"Alana was just sex and a means to an end. I needed a solid alibi at the time, and she was convenient. Aside from professional respect, I never felt anything for her." The explanation is placating–should be placating–but it only serves to frustrate Will further.

"You were intimate with her," he whispers, ducking his head in embarrassment.

"Are we not intimate?" Hannibal appears contemplative, his brows quirked together.

"Not like *that.* " Now it is Hannibal's turn to look away. While he does not whisper his sentiments, his voice drops in timbre, a unique shyness coloring the words.

"Forgive me, Will, but I was under the impression that you did not desire intimacy in that respect," he pauses, fingers clasped together as if he is preventing himself from fiddling with them. Will frowns. Hannibal is not one to fiddle, to twitch. Anything but the picture of calm and control appears foreign on his skin.

"Well it isn't like I haven't had sex before. You should know that considering the fiasco with Margot." He cringes at the memory. He was lonely, needy, and Margot wanted it. He should have known better. Hannibal's lip curls in what appears to be anger, the only feature betraying his true feelings on the matter.

"Margot took advantage of you," he begins. "She lied to further her own gain, harming you in the process."

"Sounds like something you would do," Will scoffs, unable to stop himself. The mounting anger begins to seep through Hannibal's eyes, and Will flinches when that piercing stare is directed at him.

"Do not insinuate that," he deadpans. "I may have done many things that are frowned upon by polite society, but never, *never* that."

"I'm sorry." Will forces him to meet Hannibal's eyes. "I didn't mean to imply it."

"Good. I needed you to know, regardless. Another thing I must clarify is that I did not mean that you have not had sex, I meant that I did not think you wanted it now," he pauses to clear his throat, "with me."

"Why not?" Will cannot help but ask, incredulous. He runs his fingers across the quilt, unable to contain his nerves in the same way Hannibal can.

"You did not mention it until now. I assumed you did not want to for one reason or another." The answer is offhanded and vague, but Will suspects the enmity is a facade, so he decides that at least one of them has to be honest.

"I thought you did not want to," he admits, shrugging his shoulders. A flicker of surprise appears on Hannibal's face, but the moment is so fleeting that Will considers he might have imagined it.

"I thought you wouldn't want *me,* like that."

"Will," Hannibal reaches across the bed to tilt his chin up, forcing him to meet his eyes. "I have wanted you from the moment I laid eyes on you." Will shivers at the words, almost frightened by the realization that they ring true. "Did you truly never notice?" There is genuine intrigue in his tone, and Will swallows, considering how to articulate his jumbled thoughts on the topic.

"I did, especially at first. I noticed you looking at me when we were in therapy together before my institutionalization. I ignored it at first, not really knowing what to do with it. After the metaphorical scales fell from my eyes, I assumed it was part of you manipulating me. You stopped once I got out, after all."

"It would have been easier to manipulate you had I managed to get you into my bed, much like with Alana," Hannibal agrees, "but my desire for you was always real. I will admit that my initial conduct was posturing, and that I curbed it later as your friendship mattered to me above anything else. I would be content to have you solely platonically, as long as we were together. Every intimacy that we share beyond that is a gift. One I would be remiss not to appreciate wholeheartedly." He lets his hand fall away from Will's chin, closing his eyes as if to hide from the emotion of the admission.

"So, we've both just been a bunch of insecure, lovesick idiots?" Will chuckles in an attempt to lighten the heavy mood. Hannibal joins him but sobers up within a few seconds.

"Have you ever been with a man, Will?" Will shakes his head in dissent. "I did not think so, although I was hesitant to assume with definity. It played a part in why I did not pursue sexual intimacy with you." Hannibal remains in that strange state of unhuman stillness that Will has never gotten used to in full.

"I understand." And he does. Before Hannibal, he had never considered men in any way, but Hannibal has always been an outlier, in anything. "But I do want it. I want you. I want you to know that." Hannibal stills at the words. *I want you.* There has always been a certain possessiveness between them, but oh does Will *want.* The ache permeates his flesh, all the way down into his bones, the capsules of air housed within reverberating with his desire.

"I want it too." And just like that, Hannibal springs to his feet, as if the conversation had never occurred. "I've been meaning to go out to the market to purchase food. Our supplies have run dry, and I wish to cook properly again." Will stirs, completely whiplashed by the change in subject. He is about to wave Hannibal off to do as he pleases, but he stops cold in his tracks, the chill of realization nipping at his tail.

"Uhhhh. . ." he trails off, "there may be a *slight* issue."

"And whatever might that be?" He has successfully piqued Hannibal's interest, although an air of caution is unmistakably present.

"Remember the guy you were. . ." *skinning, taking apart, disassembling,* "the guy in the ballroom?"

"Yes," comes the curt reply, his face passive and blank, almost chiding him as if to say *how could I forget?* Will pushes the hesitation down, locking it away in the basement of his mind.

"I displayed him." The transformation is palpable. Hannibal's features shift in that idiosyncratic way where the physical change is minute, but his expression is completely transformed. Pure and utter adoration is written on his face plain as day, and Will does not even realize he is holding his breath until he lets it out in a sharp sigh of relief. Once again caught off guard by Hannibal's uncanny ability to move about soundlessly, much like the predator that he is, Will jumps at the sudden hand held to his cheek.

"Magnificent boy," Hannibal croons, grinning like the cat that got the canary. "Tell me, Will. What did you create?"

"Divine punishment. I forgave how God forgives."

"We carve an idol out of fear and call it God."

“ *Yes,* ” Will breathes, “but not you nor I.”

“No,” concurs Hannibal, his hand traveling up from where it rested on Will’s cheek to tangle in his hair instead. He leans forward and places a chaste kiss on the opposite cheek, right

beside the protrusion of Will's ear. "There is no fear in our worship." The ghost of his lips lingers on Will's skin, making his hair stand on end. "Although your actions with the thief should not impede any plans for going into town. The area here is populous enough that a stranger who speaks the language should not be seen as out of place," his voice is low, placating. Will does not like where this is going. "It would be the wisest course of action for you to remain here." Will pushes Hannibal away, palms braced against the other man's shoulders in an effort to hold him at arm's length.

"Absolutely not," he counters. "Look what happened to you here, how you reacted. You can't do that in public." Hannibal resists the urge to touch him, to reassure him that way, but he realizes it would not be for the best.

"Will," he says instead, "I am not concerned. I barely ever visited there, keeping to this place most of my childhood." At Will's skeptical expression, he adds, "Besides, the place has changed since the last time I was here almost thirty years ago. Since then, Lithuania has gained independence as well."

"Alright, but promise me, *promise* , that you'll text me or call me if anything goes wrong."

"I promise."

And with that, Hannibal is off, his coat disrupting the air as he throws it over his shoulders. The contrast between today and yesterday is considerable, but then again, Hannibal has never been one to comply with expectations. Besides, the process of healing from trauma is never linear. All Will knows is that he will be here no matter what.

The warmth of summer has been clinging on with the determination of a hawk clutching its prey, but the same cannot be said for the nights. Will shivers, the evening chill sinking into his skin, raising the hairs on his arms. Hannibal should have been back hours ago. Will has taken to sitting on the steps leading up to the front door, lying in wait for the man to return. To come home. This is, or *was,* Hannibal's home. Maybe it will be again, for a time.

Will's efforts continue to be met with the lonesome howl of the wind. He really should go inside and grab his jacket, but sheer frustration and anger warm him from within. No text. No call. Nothing. Absolute radio silence. For all he knows, Jack caught Hannibal and carted him off to the BSCHI, and he will not realize until it is too late. His veins thrum with an untamed violence. Oh does he feel violent. Deciding to abandon the steps, he stalks down the beaten path, silently meandering through the overgrowth of trees like a ghostly apparition. The effervescent glow of fireflies illuminates patches of shrubbery, but he is content to rely on his ability to see in the dark. The night has been a recurring comfort for him, a place of comfort, a boat in the middle of the sea. Will remembers how the tall grass would graze his knees when he ventured outside of his house in Wolf Trap at night, the lights little fires burning within. He allowed himself to drift, securely tethered to the boat in an unforgiving sea. The tether was not as secure as he had initially thought.

While the light of day has long since announced its departure, the whorls of clouds remain. A dark grey against a navy background, leaving a window for the waning moon. The conscious goal of a specific destination evades Will, but his feet have a mind of their own and deliver him to the small house at the foot of the hill. Chiyoh has not made an appearance at the castle, so he hazards a guess that she is tied to this place, diligently tasked with the life of another. He recalls the pitiful man in the basement of the house, unable–no, *forbidden* –the grace of spoken word.

He does not know what prompts him to hide in the bushes to the side of the house, lying in wait. He does not know what prompts him to creep into the house when he witnesses Chiyoh's departure. He does not know what prompts him to remove the lock from the grate, blindfold him, and release him into the wilderness surrounding them. He simply *does.* The man falls toward him, dirty fingers desperate for purchase. The soft flesh gives way to the rigid structure of vines, each tentacle-like structure wrapping around his wrists and squeezing. The man's face transforms, his chin elongating, eyebrows curving, ears growing larger, and most distinctly, two horns sprouting from his forehead. He blinks and the world pulses, as if hinging on his every move, but the scene melts away and he is returned to the cold night air with the man trembling in his arms. He shoves him away, grimacing in disgust as he watches the man make his way for the line of trees. This is not an act of mercy.

Self-deception. Denial. Two concepts Will is intimately familiar with. He did know *exactly* why he freed the man rotting away in the basement. The man may have been the one in a physical prison, but Chiyoh exists in a prison of her own making. She is tied to this place. Unlike his tether keeping him steady, there are chains encircling her feet. He is well aware that the man will return. Running away was a bluff. They both knew it, but sometimes it can be fun to play pretend, as long as you are the one with the ace in the hole. Chiyoh deserves the same freedom that he enjoys. She deserves to free herself, to carve out the part of her that is festering away in this purgatory. This is an act of mercy.

Now, he hastily retraces his steps to his former hiding spot, lying in wait for Chiyoh's return. Surely enough, the silhouette of a woman carrying a rifle emerges from the shadows, silent footsteps treading across the detritus, prey dangling from her free hand. If anything, Chiyoh is a survivor. An unrelenting ability to endure is prerequisite for any relationship with Hannibal, and she is no exception to this. He listens more than watches as she opens the door and begins to prepare her meal. A knife against a cutting board, sharp, no doubt. The crackle of an open flame. He wonders if the meat will be tender. When the miscellaneous sounds of food preparation cease, Will rises, stretching his limbs like a cat let out of a small cage.

A lone figure appears against the trees, and Will is so preoccupied with his satisfaction that he barely registers that it is Hannibal, much less that he is carrying various cleaning supplies.

"Will?" he queries, setting the bucket gently on the ground. "I was certain you had gone to bed. Are you alright?" Before he can consider the consequences of his actions, he steps into Hannibal's space until their shoes are almost touching and slaps him across the face, hard enough for the man to turn his head with the force of the blow.

"How *dare* you ask me if I am alright?" his voice trembles with anger, and his fingers twitch. From the desire to strangle the man before him or envelop him an embrace and never let go,

it is surprisingly unclear. “You were supposed to go out for groceries. That should have taken 3 hours tops, and here you are in the middle of the night with no communication whatsoever,” he seethes. Hannibal seems to be caught speechless by his tirade, and Will is about to take advantage of the pause to continue his admonition when a piercing screech echoes through the air. He attempts to hide it, but the flicker of satisfaction in his features is enough.

“What have you done?” Hannibal’s voice is quite in the way it only ever gets when he is furious. Most people’s expressions are heightened under intense emotion, but Hannibal is the opposite in this regard. His voice quietens, his eyes become vacant, as if he has retreated to somewhere else, and he stiffens, every twitch of emotion under immense scrutiny lest he forget himself and do something rash and undoable. Upon Will’s silence, he repeats himself, his voice almost a whisper.

“What have you *done?* ”

“Nothing you wouldn’t do.” And with that, Will storms past Hannibal, marching toward the path up the hill.

“He did this. Will set him free.” Chiyoh is sprawled across the floor of the basement, her legs tucked beneath herself, an act almost childlike. Hannibal’s eyes flicker across the scattered bones. He takes in the decades of dust covering every crevice, the splatters of blood adorning Chiyoh’s face, and lastly the pig with its unseeing eyes. He suppresses the instinct to break its neck for good measure, burying it away till he might have need of it. Liters of blood pool on the ground. He is careful to avoid stepping in it as he slowly approaches, studying Chiyoh’s expressions for any disgust, fear, or discomfort. Finding none, he closes the gap between them in two swift strides and kneels before her, tilting his head in curiosity. They are strangers now. Decades have gone by with no word passed between them, yet the curve of her cheek and the swoop of her eyelashes carry a certain familiarity. “He said that you were curious if I would kill.” He makes no move to answer. Words are fruitful tools when used properly, but their absence can be equally if not more effective. “I know you were curious. You always were. But he was curious too. He wanted this.” She pauses, catches his gaze for a moment, then averts her eyes. “He was doing what you do. Are you not proud of him? Your nakama.” His nakama. The word strikes him in the chest like a hammer, knocking the wind out of his lungs. He has long since abandoned resisting his love for Will, but to see someone else witness and acknowledge their closeness fills a hole in his heart that he was unaware he had. Will had done what he had not dared. When Chiyoh had begged him to have mercy on the pig, he had considered snapping her neck. It would have been clean, simple. Merciful. The thought disappeared as soon as he saw the utter lack of fear in her eyes. She knew what he was, to an extent, and yet here she was, standing against him with everything to lose. And now here she remains, all these years later. He always admired her steadfastness.

Being reunited with Chiyoh does not awaken vaults of emotion he keeps under lock and key. His avoidance of her in the previous days had been more so a result of multiple factors

combined into the simplest course of action than a conscious decision. To the extent that he always liked her, feeling a sort of brotherly protectiveness over her, he never loved her as family. Love for Hannibal had always been complicated, a hurdle through the woods under a new moon rather than a road paved with pitfalls. Rarely being able to muster anything other than calm indifference towards the general populace, the presence of Will in his life had hit the meticulous construction of his self like a freight train. Perhaps a tornado would be more accurate of a descriptor. For his entire life, Mischa was the only person he believed himself to have loved and been capable of loving. Her death followed by the forced act of consummation cleaved him open to the very bone. The milky, glossy surface left exposed to the elements. Vulnerable. So, he learned to suture, stitched his wounds closed, and ensured that no being would ever outdraw him again. Until Will.

“Chiyoh,” he whispers, proffering an upturned hand. After a moment’s hesitation, she shakily takes it, clasping their palms together with an unexpected strength. He rises to his feet and leverages her weight against his own. She trembles but is steady enough on her feet. They ascend the stairs consecutively, Chiyoh trailing silently behind him.

A boy runs up a staircase, tugging his younger sister behind him.

“It hurts,” the girl mumbles.

“I know, we’re almost there. I’m going to help you.” He squeezes her hand, and she grimaces at the sting in her knee. They were playing tag and she fell, skinning her knee in the dirt outside.

The boy wets a rag with warm water, gently cleaning the wound. It isn’t deep, but the large surface area has nicked many small capillaries and it looks worse than it is. She winces as he applies an antibacterial cream with his fingers and wraps everything with a cloth bandage.

“Good as new,” he smiles, clasping her hands between his own larger ones.

It is as if the signal to every motor muscle in his body deadens. His feet feel leaden, as if someone bolted them to the ground and cast him in an iron mold. The thrumming in his veins quickens, pupils dilating in the semi-darkness of the stairwell.

“Hannibal. . .” Chiyoh trails off. She is more or less aware of what his former home means to him, why there are places he cannot safely tread.

“It’s nothing,” he forces himself to say, his throat bobbing with effort as he expels the words. “Come.”

He continues leading her by the hand to the small kitchen area located at the front of the small house. Wrinkling his nose slightly at the state of it, he sets out a stool for her to perch atop. Chiyoh was like a caged bird, able to stretch her wings but never take flight. Now she is free to journey as she pleases. He is curious where she will go. The trickle of running water

pierces the silence, however, neither of them seem to mind. Silence between them is like an old friend. The separation may have been prolonged, but it is easy to fall back into the comforts of familiarity. Hannibal soaks a clean cloth under the stream, wringing it out slightly before raising it to the splatters of blood on Chiyoh's skin. She angles her jaw in silent permission and relaxes a fraction when the cool cloth hits her skin.

"Does he love you, as you love him?" She asks, wonderfully direct as always. Hannibal pauses to consider, smiling softly. Perhaps in another life he would have doubted, but the truth becomes increasingly apparent with every passing moment.

"He does." No more needs to be said.

"He is your family now," she breathes, meeting his eyes with a piercing stare that would unsettle most people.

"You are also my family in a way, are you not?" He pauses his ministrations to return her icy glare, and the hint of a smile graces her features.

"I am glad to see you again." Without another word said, she rises from the stool, disappearing into the confines of the anterior rooms in the house.

Branches and stray leaves tangle in Will's hair, but he is unconcerned with the aftermath. His emotional state hovers in a limbo between a heightened awareness of everything and nothing at all. As someone whose mind typically resembles a freight train hurtling down a steep slope, the change in awareness is welcome. The surrounding foliage appears to pulse with him, beating along with his heart. He closes his eyes, shaking his head at the dissipating anger directed at Hannibal. Forgiveness and therefore betrayal have been constants in their relationship, so he berates himself for believing that either would ever waver. *Folie à deux. A madness shared by two.* They will forever be locked in this cycle of duplicity and forgiveness, the betrayer and the betrayed. Perhaps he betrayed Hannibal by leaving him just now, or by being the driving force behind his return here, to Lithuania in general. The compulsion to leave and let be is waning with every passing second, prompting him to turn on his heel and stalk back to the little house, his initial conviction lost somewhere in the thicket of trees.

The late hour must be getting to him because Will almost stumbles over the pail left out in the middle of the clearing. He picks it up, inspecting the contents more closely. Wipers, spray bottles, a chisel, a brush, and a detergent mixture are all cradled within. They almost resemble what one would use to clean a gravestone, but Hannibal was supposed to go out for groceries, not cleaning supplies. Then he eyes the various candles at the bottom of the bucket. *Mischa.* Hannibal had meant to sweep the rug out from under himself and visit the one place Will doubted he would ever deign to go. Mischa's grave. His stomach clenches as a sudden urgency overcomes him. Swift as a fox, he rushes to the little house, glass still entirely

fogged over with age. Thankfully, the door is unlocked, and no one stops him as he descends the dimly lit stairs to the basement.

The scene he finds laid out before him is a spectacle in and of itself, but what catches him off guard is the image of Hannibal sitting on the floor, his back against a cupboard, turning a shard of glass over and over and over.

“I kept cochlear gardens when I was a young man, fattening snails on herbs and vine leaves.” Hannibal’s voice is low, but not in the same manner as before. The emotion is too far removed from contentment, but there is a certain satisfaction tinged with something else. Will averts his gaze to the image of blood and gore in the center of the room. The man from before, lying dead in a pool of his blood. Snails have begun trailing through it, leaving streaks of red in their wake. The handles flicker in their holders, moving shadows across Hannibal’s face.

“Snails are not the only creatures who prefer eating in company,” Will replies, kneeling beside Hannibal on the floor, careful to avoid the shards of glass. Hannibal turns his head to face him, eyes following last of all.

“She asked me if I was proud of you,” he pauses and looks away, “Then she asked if you loved me.” *What did you say?* The question threatens to break free, but Will seals it tightly inside. Instead, his eyes fill with tears, blurring his surroundings almost to the point of unrecognition.

“Do you truly not know?” His voice breaks, a single tear spilling over. For all the man before him has done, there has not been a moment where he has not felt loved and cherished. Hurt, yes, but never abandoned in the cold. It would break his heart if Hannibal felt that way. Hannibal catches the tear on his pointer finger before it can run down Will’s cheek. No evidence to be left behind.

“I do not need to know.” He takes Will’s hand in his. “Knowing is secondary. I can feel it. Here,” he whispers as he lifts their clasped hands to his chest, pressing Will’s palm flat against his heart hard enough that he can feel the rhythmic pulse. “You have marked me in a way no one else has. I carry a piece of you with me everywhere I go.”

“I . . .” Will stutters, “I found the pail you left outside.” Hannibal tilts his head quizzically, utterly nonchalant about the extreme tonal segway.

“And what about the items causes such intrigue?” Will sits up straighter, allowing his hand to drop from its place atop Hannibal’s chest and grasping his wrist instead. He decides the action feels too much like that of a needy child, so he pulls away entirely, unceremoniously depositing his hands in his lap. A flicker of disappointment passes across Hannibal’s face, but it is so fast that he cannot be sure it was not a trick of the light.

“You were going to visit Mischa.” He allows the bombshell to drop. Up until now, Hannibal could pretend. Visiting Mischa could exist as an idea in the confines of his mind, available to be acted upon at will or not, but now that Will has brought it into the world, it is no longer a fickle dream, but a true commitment. Hannibal’s face falls for a split second, the light leaving his eyes until they swallow all of the light surrounding them. It is almost as if he forgets that

Will knows his tells, that he can read the minute twitch of Hannibal's lips, the tension in his jaw like a blind man reads braille.

"It will be Vėlinės soon," Hannibal says, turning his head away. "The Day of the Dead. I have neglected her for too many a moon," he sighs. "It is difficult to imagine that she would be an adult now. I think she should be older than you, actually, but all I can remember. . ." the words trail off, only the sound of water left to drown out their steady breaths.

"Hannibal," Will assures, taking Hannibal's hand in his. "Sometime, either now or in the future, you will be ready to talk about her, and when you are, I will listen." He squeezes his hand for good measure, and the ghost of a smile crosses Hannibal's mouth. "Come." He pulls them both to their feet. "I think we have unfinished business in need of attending."

The tableau is unlike anything either of them has created separately. It makes sense, the value of a whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The basement is now home to a human dragonfly. The transformation of what was once ugly into something beautiful. Reborn in the spiral of life and death. They bound the man with rope, cocooning his flesh away. Dozens of snails adorn the body like baubles on a Christmas tree. His wings protrude from a network of knots at his back, broken wine bottles refracting the minimal light across the space of the room.

Two figures stand before the dragonfly feeling only contentment.

It Is All Art to You

Chapter Summary

> “This is quite a labor-intensive breakfast,” he voices, attempting to break the silence.
>
> “This isn’t breakfast,” comes the almost curt reply.
>
> “What is it then?” he shoots back, attempting to keep up with the tonal shift of the conversation.
>
> “Pickles. Well, I am marinating the mushrooms. I believe you might call this canning, except I am using salt or vinegar as a preservative,” Hannibal explains.

Chapter Notes

> Hahahahaha I planned to post this before November first and it's *checks calendar* the middle of December. I was reading my previous ANs and laughing about how I was saying school was killing me. My professors must have seen that and said "hold my beer."
>
> Anway, here's an extremely self-indulgent chapter that I hope you all enjoy because I had so much fun writing it. There is some build-up to smut but nothing explicit and it happens off-screen.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Soft beams of light dance across Will’s closed eyelids, yet their warmth registers regardless. Awareness of his surroundings grows at a steady pace, spreading through his limbs like milk in a cup of hot tea. With that awareness comes the realization that the pillow he was suffocating himself with is actually Hannibal’s chest, and he has somehow crawled almost bodily onto the man. He tilts his head and meets Hannibal’s eyes, watching as the other smiles that rare blissful smile that he only ever catches in moments like these. Fingers entangle themselves in his hair, and Will attempts to shift some of his weight, but Hannibal only holds him tighter, wordlessly asking him to stay. *Stay. Stay with me by the fire. Ignore the flurry outside.*

“I love you,” he whispers into Hannibal’s bare skin, unsure of what prompted the words to escape from between his lips. All he knows is that he wants Hannibal to feel the words echoing through every chamber of his memory palace, permeating every surface. “I love you,” he repeats, equally as quiet, but no less reverent. Hannibal remains silent, his breathing

the only telltale sign of him being awake, but he tightens his embrace to let Will know that he heard and that he loves him too. His grip is almost at the point of being uncomfortable, but Will finds that he enjoys the feeling of being held so strongly, bruises or not. This way they can physically come close to what their minds and souls have achieved. *Without me, there is no you, and without you, there is no me. We are conjoined.*

Separation at this moment would be unthinkable. They have bled each other dry, snapped bones and ground them to dust. The cost of surviving one another is the inability to survive without each other. *I would paint your grave with my blood* , Will thinks. *Even if you never asked me to.*

"Aš. . ." the whisper is so quiet that Will barely registers hearing it, but he can feel the way Hannibal's breath ruffles his hair, as he takes a steadying breath, his heart beating faster against Will's cheek. "Aš tav. . . aš tave myliu." The lilt of the words fits his accent, and Will traces the sounds to their origin at the reverberations of his chest. He may not speak Lithuanian, but the meaning is crystal clear all the same.

Will reaches up, resting his fingertips on Hannibal's forehead, the contact burning like an invisible brand. A deity marking his devotee. The light brush of eyelashes against his palm incites something inexplicable within the depths of himself. As if sensing the shift, Hannibal presses Will's palm to his cheek and kisses the inside of his wrist. Feather-light, like a hummingbird's heartbeat. Rotating his grip, Will lowers Hannibal's hand to his eye level, tracing the scar across his wrist with both reverence and disdain.

"I wish I never asked for this," he breathes, grimacing at the now-faded white ridge cleaving Hannibal's forearm as violently as Moses parted the Red Sea.

"I wish you did it yourself," Hannibal sighs. "I always considered these yours, nonetheless. Like the moon owes her reflection to the sun. This is a reflection of you."

"We are all a reflection of those around us, more or less."

"A mosaic of those we cherish?"

"Something like that."

Will finally rolls out of their bed, frowning at the position of the sun outside the window. They went back up the hill late last night, but he had not considered he would sleep this long past morning. Retreating from the window, he dresses warmly. The late October weather is beginning to turn, and the insulation of the manor is not what it once was with shattered glass welcoming drafts. Hannibal mirrors him, donning a cable-knit sweater over his button-up. He looks so soft and vulnerable like this that Will has the sudden compulsion to hug him. Part of what he shares with Hannibal is accepting the darkness in himself, the darkness that found kinship in Hannibal's darkness, but there is another part of himself that their relationship unearthed. The part that grew to be comfortable with affection and vulnerability. The part that understands that they hold each other's hearts in their hands. He winds his arms around Hannibal's stomach, chin resting on his shoulder. Will breathes in at the juncture between his jaw and ear, savoring the woodsy, slightly spicy scent he associates with the man. Hannibal covers one of his hands with his own, twining their fingers together, the other ghosting across

his cheek, thumb coming to rest just above his pulse point. Will squeezes him firmly, and Hannibal tips his head back, savoring.

“I remembered something while I was waiting for you to wake up.” Will can feel Hannibal’s words reverberate through his skin; his cheek pressed against his throat.

“Mmmm,” Will prompts, refusing to remove himself from their embrace.

“I must admit, so many images in my memory palace are crystal clear, as if I have visited sights, I have not seen in years yesterday, but some of those that dwell in the oldest halls are buried between layers of rubble. Memories I have spent years locking away. Our travels to this place have successfully cleared so much of the dust,” he pauses to sigh, tracing along the underside of Will’s jaw. “I have something to show you, Will, and I may require your assistance.”

Hesitant to break the contact, Will acquiesces that they should probably start the day at some point. Besides, Hannibal clearly has plans for them, so he lets go of Hannibal, immediately missing the warmth against his chest. Hannibal grasps Will’s hand in his, pulling him into the hallway, further into the depths of the wing than Will has ever ventured. The decor remains consistent throughout this part of the manor, but then Hannibal presses a hidden latch, and a simple door swings open. Now that he knows it is there, it is impossible to miss, and had he been looking he would likely have found it, but upon first glance from untrained eyes, the door is astoundingly inconspicuous.

Hannibal pulls him across the threshold, and the corridors appear much smaller and simpler. Old wooden planks in place of polished stone, iron candlestick holders instead of elaborate sconces line the walls, the very air more constricting. Their journey leads them up a winding staircase, finally halting at a landing on what Will presumes to be the fourth floor. Hannibal lets go of his hand, so he remains where he is. If Hannibal needs to do this alone, then Will will give him the space he needs. Hannibal hovers his hand over the door handle, leaning forward to rest his forehead on the doorframe. His shoulders tense, and he pushes down on the handle, slowly opening the door. Beckoning Will toward him as he steps inside, Hannibal takes in a breath, and Will wonders what he can smell among the dust and mildew that have accumulated throughout the decades of his absence. Contrary to the guest rooms, this bedroom has been pulled apart. The fabric of the four-poster bed has been hastily torn off, leaving tendrils of thread hanging like a funerary shroud. What is left of the furniture has been knocked around. The room is ostentatious enough, even in this state of disarray, that Will would have guessed that it is the master bedroom, but knowing that Hannibal specifically brought him here, it is impossible to mistake it for anything else.

“It was rare for couples of my parents’ generation to share a single bed of this size,” Hannibal voices, pulling Will from his thoughts. “More often than not separate beds were pushed together or they would simply sleep in separate beds. Such an arrangement was a hallmark of wealth or status. Obviously, times have changed, but many century-old traditions still cling to this place.” His tone is not melancholy, but there is something about the intonations that speak of hidden emotions.

“I’m sorry about your parents, Hannibal. I really am,” Will says, feeling almost silly.

“Don’t be.” Hannibal turns to him. “Death will make a bride of us all.”

Vaguely gesturing to their surroundings, he continues. “I only mention all of this because my father’s respect for tradition and my mother’s respect for my father was deeply interwoven in their marriage.” His eyes search the room, widening a fraction when they find their target. Hannibal strides across the room to the fireplace, not urgency but anticipation coloring his steps as he retrieves a long-rusted fire poker. Turning to a corner of the wall where the stone brick lays exposed, he runs his fingertips over the ridges, searching for something. “At the center of my family crest, there rises a snake, coiled in on itself. Snakes often symbolize change and transformation, but mythologically they are tied to the Snake Queen Egle and her children, Oak, Birch, and Aspen. My father was staunch in his efforts to educate M–us about our history.” Having found whatever he was looking for, Hannibal levers the fire poker against the small space. “Come, Will. I hypothesize your expertise will surpass mine in this area. This stone should be movable and will reveal an alcove in the wall.”

Will nods, still processing the breadth of information presented to him. Whatever is behind the wall clearly was important to Hannibal’s parents and is important to Hannibal now. He takes the tongs from the fireplace and gives them to Hannibal, using the poker to chip away at the stone ever so slightly. The years of dust have thoroughly coated the seams, making the way more slippery than usual. Not knowing what else to say, Will attempts to prompt information.

“How did you know where to find this? It appears well hidden considering the damage to the interior of the room.” The stone is beginning to shift slightly, so he keeps alternating between strategies.

“We were forced to sell many of our possessions before they were outright taken from us. My mother’s engagement ring among the finer jewelry and valuables. She asked me to help her hide this away. . . in case I would have use of it one day.” Hannibal shakes his head. “I think she somehow knew that her days on this Earth were numbered.”

“Did you love her?” Will asks, kicking himself for the glaringly inappropriate question, but Hannibal’s lips twitch upward in that telltale thoughtful smile of his.

“Love her, no. I respected my parents, as one does, and I liked my mother. I would not have connections to Italy without her, but. . . Mischa adored her.”

“You became her mother and father.”

“In a way, yes. She deserved more; she always did.”

Will finally breaks the stone free with a harsh blow to one of the corners, leaving Hannibal to look through the alcove. He retreats with a small wooden box, and it is like the atmosphere of the room changes. Hannibal appears sheepish, the minute sagging of his shoulders weighing on Will more than the tragedy of everything else. They are both kneeling on the floor amidst the carnage, and Hannibal trembles as he lifts the lid.

Two golden wedding bands sit atop a layer of velvet. One is made up of a single snake coiled in on itself, its eyes small specs of garnet inlaid into the metal. The band itself is thicker than

the other, the body of the snake wider. The second is composed of two opposing snakes, their thinner bodies soldered together at equal intervals, creating a double band. The heads themselves lay perpendicular to the bodies, creating a flower-like effect. Small diamonds mark the eyes with a larger garnet stone at the crest of each head. The patterns of the scales are worn, but Will can still see that they match. Two interpretations of a singular muse.

“Originally they would be passed down to me to wear with my future wife,” Hannibal whispers, breath caught in his throat like cotton. “Yet with the course of events, I convinced my mother to give her ring to Mischa, so that she would have something to remember her by after the dust settled. Now it all seems like a faraway dream.” Will feels as if he is drowning in it all, unable to clear the silt from his eyes and witnessing only a blurry picture that he has yet to decipher the meaning of. He searches Hannibal’s eyes for answers, but the man averts his gaze, swallowing heavily. “Please say something, Will.”

“They’re beautiful,” Will stammers, unsure of what Hannibal wants him to say, knowing that it is not enough. Hannibal sighs, the air of apprehension around him thick enough to cut with a knife.

“I know we discussed marriage before, but if it is too soon. . .”

Oh. Will mentally slaps himself. For someone so capable of understanding others, he finds himself outmaneuvered on occasion without Hannibal even knowing that there is maneuvering to be had. Hannibal is not showing him his parents’ rings as therapy for sorting through his memories, he unearthed the rings for them. Their wedding bands.

“Will–” he begins.

“I’ll clean them for you, for us. If you want me to. I’ll clean them.”

Like clockwork, the tension in Hannibal’s shoulders melts away, and the crimson flecks in his eyes gleam like dying embers.

“Thank you, Will.”

“Of course.” Will reaches out, hesitating, but Hannibal does not bat an eye as he hands him the box. Will dips his head in gratitude and cradles it in his fingers, considering what he will need to properly restore them. Having worked mainly on boat motors, this type of work was usually out of his pay grade, but once he cleaned some gold and silver jewelry as a favor, so he knows his way around the basics. “They really are beautiful, you know.”

“I had hoped you would like them,” Hannibal nods. “Nothing ostentatious, but still symbolic and meaningful.”

“Soon, Hannibal,” Will returns his gaze to him. “I want it to be soon. There is no one left for either of us, except Chiyoh maybe, but she’s here. As long as she hasn’t left,” he adds, considering that had he been chained to a single place for so long by a promise he would leave as quickly as possible. Hannibal beams, eyes glistening at the words.

“Anything, Will. Anything.” The words are breathy, his accent thicker than usual. He reaches for the box and closes the lid gently before standing. “I believe breakfast is in order. I also have a few things I would like to see to in the kitchen, and there should be enough cleaning supplies somewhere here for you.”

The pair retrace their steps to the winding staircase, some of the planks creaking as they descend. Instead of continuing into the original hallway, Hannibal descends further until they reach the first floor, or as Hannibal exasperatedly calls it, the ground floor.

The kitchen is old but remodeled sometime in the last century because of the gas stove and refrigerator present in the corner. Various bags of vegetables, meats, jars, and salt are arranged on the counter. Now, Will is beginning to understand what took Hannibal so long yesterday. Despite last night’s events occurring less than twelve hours ago, it feels as if a lifetime has passed. Hannibal strides over to one of the lowest cabinets and kneels as he yanks it open. The ancient tracks squeal like they are being murdered, but he simply begins systematically removing the contents. Once the drawer is clear, he reaches into its depths and presses down at an angle, revealing the false bottom of the drawer. Will joins him at the drawer’s mouth, eyeing more conventional cleaning materials such as vinegar, baking soda, hydrogen peroxide, and bleach, but there are also more sinister compounds that Will can only guess the purpose of. Little bottles of pills, an assortment of knives, lye, and cough syrup are all organized in neat rows.

“Mustard gas?” Will jokes, the mirth not quite reaching his eyes.

“I actually did consider it, if only to see what would happen,” Hannibal answers, shrugging his shoulders. “Most of this is long expired, but the vinegar and baking soda might prove useful.”

“I guess we could make one of those paper-mache volcanoes,” says Will as he reaches for the vinegar and baking soda. At Hannibal’s quizzical expression, he sighs. “Guess it’s more of an American thing.” He picks up one of the cloths tucked into the back of the drawer. It is quite dusty, but it will do. “Anyway, the stones are garnets and diamonds, right?” The question throws Hannibal off guard as he was far away in the halls of his mind, and he adjusts back into his earthly body,

“Yes, garnets were quite common among the nobility for their supposed reputation for protection,” he explains, and Will nods.

“Good, that means this will work.” Will stands, arranging everything on an empty countertop. “You shouldn’t use anything harsher than dish soap on turquoise, emeralds, and opal.” Hannibal nods, replacing the false bottom and original contents of the drawer. He rises to his feet and begins sorting through the bags, finally opening the bag of mushrooms, most of which Will does not recognize. He rinses them and cuts the longer stems off, then sets off in search of a medium-sized pan. Surprisingly, there are containers of propane under the sink, and Hannibal begins hooking them up to the stove. The mushrooms are added to a mix of salt and water and left to simmer on a low flame. Next, swift hands chop the cabbage finely along with a handful of carrots and deposit the mixture in a large bowl. Hannibal adds salt and begins crushing the shards with his hands. Will looks at the way his forearms flex, considering how violent those hands can be yet how gentle they are with him.

Will returns his attention to the task at hand, shaking away distracting thoughts. He dilutes the vinegar with water and soaks the rings, gently moving them to aid the chemical process. Typically, he would wear gloves, but the vinegar will not do worse than dry out his hands. After they finish soaking, he fishes them out and polishes the bands with the cloth, rinsing in the vinegar mixture after every pass. After a few rounds, he switches the vinegar mixture for a baking soda paste, making sure the vinegar is properly rinsed away.

“This is quite a labor-intensive breakfast,” he voices, attempting to break the silence.

“This isn’t breakfast,” comes the almost curt reply.

“What is it then?” he shoots back, attempting to keep up with the tonal shift of the conversation.

“Pickles. Well, I am marinating the mushrooms. I believe you might call this canning, except I am using salt or vinegar as a preservative,” Hannibal explains.

“Are we staying that long?” Will only ever canned food whenever they had extra money and could save food for the winter. Not breakfast, indeed.

“It is always prudent to be prepared.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Will sighs, fighting the urge to rub his eyes. Baking soda would be rather unpleasant. He returns to the routine of polishing and rinsing, stealing quick glances in Hannibal’s direction.

“You can ask, you know. I am not Pandora’s box; curiosity is not forbidden.”

“Ask about what?” Will questions, wary of the direction of the conversation.

“You know what,” counters Hannibal.

“The cabinet?”

“What else, Will? I don’t particularly think you care about my recipe for *raugintų kopūstų* .”

“You know, sometimes I don’t understand you at all. You’re like a blank wall, freshly painted, but then the final piece falls into place and the wall disappears. You become transparent to me. I can read you like braille.”

“Will–” Hannibal tries, but Will interrupts.

“Let me finish, Hannibal. You walk around the world, seemingly a man out of his time, molding the world to you instead. You can bend, but you’d rather rearrange the night sky in your image. You are in a constant competition with God that you know you can’t win. Ninety-nine percent of the time you are in utter control of not only yourself, but everyone around you as well. It’s fun, a game.” He steps closer to Hannibal, emboldened. “Then that one percent unearths itself from the depths where you buried it, and suddenly you are making pickles for the winter. Is this disbelief that I can accept you for the absolute mess that you are? I’m here, knowing what you did. I lived in your head for years, Hannibal. I would go to

your crime scenes and act out the murders myself. Do you really think that seeing your childhood stash of lye would change anything?" Hannibal averts his eyes, head dipping almost imperceptibly.

"I worry that your desire to bring me here stems from your compulsion to prove my victimhood in all of this. That I am somehow a product of unfortunate circumstances. There is nothing that can explain away what I do. Nothing happened to me. I happened." One of the pots on the stove begins bubbling, and Hannibal moves to turn the gas off, stirring the contents slowly.

"That isn't exactly true," Will counters. "Yes, what happened to you does not explain or excuse why you murder people, why you see them as animals, but it does explain why you choose to eat your victims. You're making pickles because there was a time when you didn't have enough food in the winter, and you can't bear the thought of it happening again." He washes his hands in the sink, moving to hold the jars so that Hannibal can pour the warm mixture into them, covering the mushrooms he cooked earlier. "When I lived in Wolf Trap, I left rotten food in my fridge for months because I could not fathom throwing it away despite it being well past the point of edible. It's the same pathology, only a different expression." He turns to go back to his place by the counter, but quickly adds, "And I do care about your recipe for *raugintų kopūstų* ." Hannibal smiles at his horrific pronunciation, and Will laughs. "I mean it when I say I want everything. I want to cook with you, to learn your favorite recipes." Hannibal's eyes widen at this, signaling that he knows exactly what Will means.

Will smiles softly, bracing himself. "I want to go with you to clean Mischa's grave." The smile on Hannibal's face dies, wilting like a flower kissed by the reaper's scythe. Up until now, the pail filled with candles was a passing thought, something to be kept in mind and potentially acted upon, but just as easily pushed aside and kept as an ideal within the mind's eye. Now, the thought becomes tangible and moreso actionable. Will knows, and abandoning the pail to the elements becomes betrayal, abandonment.

"She deserves better than me," Hannibal whispers, finally looking at Will. The love he finds in his eyes is palpable, and Will quickly rinses the rings one last time, drying them with a fresh towel.

"But she has you, and you did your best." Will opens his hand, the sister bands lying flat across his palm. "Here, I think I've done everything I can sans actually polishing them." Hannibal plucks the double-banded one out of his hand and turns it about, running his thumb across the now gleaming gold. The years of grime dulled both metal and gem, so now the rings almost glow with a cold flame.

"You prefer the single band?" Hannibal phrases it like a question, but Will knows that he knows the answer. He nods in assent.

"It's simpler, the stones are smaller. It's your father's, right? I don't want to take what was promised to you." Will studies the band in his palm. It is heavy, a solid weight to the gold, but it is not chunky. A quality piece of jewelry meant to last for generations.

"Originally, yes, my father's ring was meant for me and my mother's for my wife, but you are not my wife, and in the end, my mother's ring was to go to Mischa, who is deceased." He

blinks. “I do not particularly care for the rules and stipulations of tradition, and there is hardly anyone left alive to enforce them.”

“And here I was thinking you were going to be my *lawfully* wedded wife, emphasis on the lawfully,” chuckles Will, and Hannibal grins.

“In that case, if I am to be your *wife,* then my future husband should take his shoes off and stomp on the cabbage for me,” he retorts.

“Oh, just the shoes?” Will prods. “You’re not going to ask me to take the rest of my clothes off?”

“Not willing to wait until our wedding night?” Hannibal tisks, arching an eyebrow.

“That only applies if you’re both virgins. And religious,” he adds. “Your version of religion is limbo dancing with the devil, and mine is cheering you on from the stands while I stuff myself with shitty popcorn.” At this, Hannibal laughs, a rare sound, but one that Will hopes to cherish and hear as often as possible. Will kisses him then, short and sweet, a stolen moment during something requiring their attention. “We should try them on to see if they fit. I can try resizing them if need be since I don’t know where else we would get it done. Something this specific might raise questions. Better safe than sorry.” Hannibal nods in acquiescence. Will slips the band onto his ring finger, surprised that it fits quite well. Hannibal’s is too small for him, which does not surprise Will in the slightest. He will have to devise a plan, but before the cogs can properly turn in his head, Hannibal returns the bands to their velvet home within the box.

“I think lunch will be beneficial before any further exertions,” he suggests.

“Too late for breakfast?” teases Will, standing beside him by the counter.

Apparently, Hannibal bought *paštetas* at the market, and he makes fresh sandwiches with tomatoes, onion, and salt on rye bread for their lunch. Will has been addicted to liver paté since Hannibal first made it for him at the cliff house, but clearly, the water here must be different because it is so much better. The tomatoes and onions are simple, and it’s just that: comfort food.

Will spends the rest of midday shadowing Hannibal in the kitchen, stirring pots, chopping and peeling vegetables, and sealing jars. He listens intently to the difference between pickling and marinating, as well as an exasperated grievance about how the word “pickle” is an adjective and can refer to a multitude of vegetables rather than simply cucumbers. Will’s experiences with canning mainly include greens, corn, and beans, often the result of large amounts of fresh produce gifted by farmers after jobs. The method is slightly different but similar enough that he catches on easily enough. He is beginning to understand why Hannibal joked about stomping on the cabbage to release the juices because kneading it with his hands is a tiring job. He expects their knuckles will be rubbed raw by the time they finish.

Will prompts Hannibal with questions, and the man surprisingly answers them without hesitation. In turn, Will answers Hannibal’s own questions about his childhood, most of which he has not thought about in years. New Orleans boatyards, tractor engines, fishing in

the river, constantly moving from school to school. It has all started to blend together. The domesticity of it all makes Will grin. Whenever outsiders attempt to analyze their relationship, all they see is the violence and bloodshed, but there is so much tenderness that no one but them has witnessed. Hannibal kisses the crown of his hair when they finish, resolving to store the jars in the cellar where temperatures remain cool and dry throughout the day. Between the sauerkraut, cucumbers, mushrooms, beets, and tomatoes, there are enough vegetables to last them for a long time.

There is no access to a fridge as the electricity does not work in the few parts of the manor that are wired, so the dinner Hannibal makes is surprisingly meatless. In a few weeks, it will be cold enough to store things outside, but for the moment they will have to make do with cooking food right away, relying on dried and smoked meat, or vegetarian meals.

“It is rare I cook a meatless meal,” Hannibal muses, watching intently as Will takes his first bite of the potato pancakes and goulash. Not minding the scrutiny, Will closes his eyes, savoring.

“Was the salad you served Freddie actually vegetarian?” he asks. Hannibal smiles, sipping at his tea. He will have to find access to quality wine soon enough, but the tea will do for now.

“It was. I simply presented her a larger portion of what I served you and Abigail since it was meant to be a side.” Will nods, glancing to his upper left in contemplation.

“I don’t know,” he chuckles. “I just pictured you sneaking plasma or something into the dressing or toasting the seeds in lard, or whatever it’s called when you get it from a human instead of a pig.”

“I think the term lard is still suitable. Either way, I promise you the salad was vegetarian.” The corners of Hannibal’s mouth tick up in that smile that is not quite a grin or a smirk but a subtle version of something in between. “I did however soak limbs in the beer I brewed and served Alana.”

“I’m actually curious as to what that tasted like,” Will admits, shaking his head in disbelief at his audacity.

“I brewed it in a cabernet-sauvignon wine barrel, which colored it a unique shade of red.” He takes a bite of the food. The spices are adequate, but he will have to look into expanding his collection to more than a few staples.

“I bet you loved that.”

“It was entertaining. Even more so when I found out I managed to put Alana off beer entirely.”

“You really were bored until I came along,” Will frowns, brow furrowing.

“You have no idea, my love.” Hannibal stands to collect the dishes. The dining table was long gone, but they managed to find a surface spacious enough to have dinner.

They wash the dishes in companionable silence, sipping at the still half-full cups of tea. None of the finer china survived either.

“Why surgery?” asks Will absentmindedly. Hannibal raises an eyebrow, so he elaborates. “I mean, you could have studied anatomy on your own, or gone into a different specialty like psychiatry from the start. I doubt there was an allure to sleepless nights on call, and saving lives yourself isn’t something you would consider a direct benefit.” Hannibal pushes a stray curl behind his ear, fingertips lingering just under his chin.

“Tell me, do you recall what you admitted when we met your father?” He asks, but Will shakes his head. “You said that you understood my fascination with the human body, that it was beautiful.” His fingers travel to Will’s collarbone where he digs them into the tender skin and feels the blood thrum. Will catches his wrist there, pressing into his wrist in a mirror of Hannibal’s movements.

“It was beautiful. The way the tissues are all connected. The way our brain somehow makes us sentient and pilots the mess that is the human body. It’s like a phrase with more than one meaning,” he breathes, neither lowering their hands.

“The human body can survive so much torment,” Hannibal whispers, his voice a low murmur in Will’s ear. “An adult is able to be drained of fourteen percent of their blood volume without experiencing any side effects, about forty percent, and still live. The liver can regenerate itself fully, reactivating cell division from the typical dormant state. Vestigial structures connect us to our animal ancestors, evidence of the human capacity for survival over generations of natural selection. So often the body is viable, but it is the mind that must also prevail. Phantom sensations in amputated nerves, post-traumatic stress disorder, remission from drug abuse, all a battle between the body and the mind. How fascinating it is to witness.” Will’s eyes widen with understanding, gleaming in the lessening light of the setting sun.

“It’s all art to you,” he says, louder than he meant. “Your drawings, cooking, surgery, the way you dismantle your pigs and butcher them,” he pauses, “and your desire to see how far you could go before you broke *me* .” The last words are soft, not filled with grief, but Hannibal flinches all the same. It is almost imperceptible, but with how intimately they are standing, Will would be remiss to miss the flicker in his eyes.

“How can one deign to draw the ripple of abdominal muscles without having ever seen them flayed out for themselves?” Hannibal queries. “Michelangelo was so dedicated to anatomical accuracy that he performed public dissections as a young man and then countless others in private. His contemporaries claimed his anatomical knowledge rivaled and even surpassed those in respective medical fields.” The pressure of his touch increases, and Will can feel his pulse pound against his fingers. “How can one seek to understand a broken mind without taking it apart first?” Will’s breath hitches, and Hannibal stalks behind him, tread silent even in the quiet of twilight. He keeps his hand on Will, fingers spread out to cover his shoulder as he rounds him like one would when placating a nervous horse. His arm is crossed over Will’s chest, holding him tight against himself as his opposite hand settles across his stomach. Will leans into the touch, and Hannibal kisses the crown of his ear, traveling lower to his earlobe and the junction of his neck and jaw. Will hums, blissful.

“I’d like to see you try,” he jests, needlessly answering Hannibal’s rhetorical question. Hannibal continues his ministrations, eventually changing the topic.

“You have seen countless bodies hewn open in death, but your father was the only person you have witnessed in such a state but clinging onto life. There is a certain twilight between life and death where the body begins to give up. The heart rate decreases.” He presses his hand over Will’s heart, feeling each powerful beat. “The kidneys release copious amounts of adrenaline.” He thumbs over the skin on Will’s back just below his ribs. “The sympathetic nervous system is activated.” He runs his fingers over Will’s arms, feather light.

Will turns viciously in his grip, crushing their mouths together as he tugs on Hannibal’s hair. Hannibal responds immediately as he clings onto his shoulders and presses them closer together. Long, slender fingers tangle themselves in his curls, and he smiles against Hannibal’s mouth because the man never fails to express his adoration for his hair. He isn’t certain what it is about it, it’s just hair, but Will understands the sentiment all the same because he loves the little creases in Hannibal’s eyes when he smiles, the way a few strands of hair frame his forehead when he didn’t bother to style it, the warm, spicy scent he has learned to associate with home. They are drowning in each other, drinking the other in. Will tilts his head to deepen the kiss, wanting, *wanting.*

“You’re mine,” he gasps as he breaks away to catch his breath.

“Yours,” Hannibal murmurs, lips reddened and swollen, “as you are mine.” Will only presses his forehead against Hannibal’s in silent agreement.

“Bed?” he asks, and Hannibal looks at him hungrily, eyes drifting from his eyes to his lips before he smiles and kisses him soundly.

“Are you certain?” He appears circumspect. “I want this to be something you want for yourself, not because I want it.” *I do not wish to take from you what you do not give freely and wholeheartedly,* remains unsaid.

“Yes, I’ve had a long time to think about it. I want it, I want you. I do want to take a bath first though because my hair is devastatingly greasy,” he chuckles, self-consciously running his fingers through his hair.

“If this is avoidance–” Hannibal begins, but Will cuts him off.

“Not in the slightest. I just really do want a bath. Wait in the room for me, yes?” Hannibal appears like he wants to argue, but instead, he nods and, to Will’s surprise, does as he is told and disappears into the hallway leading to the stairs.

Will emerges from the adjoining bathroom with his hair towel dried and wearing only pajama bottoms to find Hannibal sitting on the bed, feet planted firmly on the floor as he stares off into the distance.

“Hey, you ok?” he asks, cupping Hannibal’s cheek with his hand. The man before him swallows thickly and nods, those pools of red, amber, and earth piercing through Will until he

feels the anxiety rolling off of him in waves. “You’re. . . nervous,” he says for lack of a better word. Hannibal moves to turn his face away, but Will cups his cheeks with both hands and forces him to *look* at him.

“I’ve wanted you for so long, Will,” he sighs. “Now that I have you, I am hesitant to do anything that may jeopardize what we share.” Will frowns, frustrated at how the beautiful man before him can believe that the way Will aches for him is not the same. “I am uncertain if my feelings and wants are not simply mirrored by your empathy.”

“My love for you is not an echo of yours, and you can feel that, I know you can, and this is no different than that.” He strokes his thumb across the plush of Hannibal’s lips, savoring the way his breath catches at the touch. “Trust me when I say I know what I want for myself.”

“I trust you.”

“Do you, now?” Will teases, flicking open the buttons of Hannibal’s shirt and sliding it off his shoulders. He touches the plane of Hannibal’s bare chest with reverence, smoothing across planes of muscle and skin and enjoying how Hannibal shivers at the contact. He leans down to slot their mouths together, feeling warm hands on his hips, tracing circles around the bone that juts out. He tips them back onto the bed and suddenly he’s falling, falling, cradled in Hannibal’s arms.

Chapter End Notes

My search history after this chapter is so wack

The Flames of a Thousand Candles Dance with my Soul

Chapter Summary

> “Do you miss your house, Will?” Hannibal asks, the crunch of leaves under their shoes resounding through the piercing quiet. Soon the leaves will make way for flurries of snow.
> “Yes and no,” he ponders aloud. “I loved the quiet of it, but we had that in Italy. I miss my dogs. I also miss our orchard.” He shrugs his shoulders. “It’s one of those things that is in the past. I know we can’t go back.”

Chapter Notes

> I cannot believe the journey I began early last year is finally over. This is the last chapter of this work, but the third work in this series is the "true" last chapter. I made the decision to separate the two because the ending is dark, and I want to give readers the option of a happy ending. If you want all roads to end well, this is the last chapter. If you are a masochist like me, the next chapter is linked as the next work.
>
> I went a bit overboard and accidentally made this chapter very long, but I truly poured my heart and soul into it, so I hope that you all enjoy. Comments are greatly appreciated, but of course no pressure at all, I'm always overjoyed to just have people clicking on my work. Thank you all so much for being here with me through this journey.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

> Still cradled between Hannibal’s legs, Will nuzzles further into his neck, pressing lazy kisses to the tender skin over his carotid. For a moment, he imagines biting there, tearing flesh with his teeth, and pinning Hannibal until the heme drips down his chin. The image passes, but he can feel Hannibal smiling as if he also sees the scene dancing behind his eyelids. Hannibal traces his slender fingers across Will’s back, the exploration tender and smooth, relishing the intimacy of the aftermath. It is obvious that he is refraining from lingering on the scars, no patterns traced across the physical markers of Will’s past. For this mercy, he is grateful. Too many scars already litter their individual pasts and more still mar their collective. He tightens his hold on Hannibal’s hair, arm somehow caught between his back and the mattress. In response, Hannibal grips his hips even more, pressing their bodies almost as close as they can be.
>
> “You’re so quiet,” Will sighs as he strokes a strand of hair out of his eyes. On a typical day, a quiet Hannibal would not be cause for concern. Both of them enjoy moments of silence and

introspection, even in each other's presence, but with the added context of recent events, unprecedented silence is something Will worries about.

"Mmmmmmmhhhh," Hannibal replies, eyelashes fluttering closed. Will kisses him on the corner of his mouth, and he leans into the adoration, his touch burning Will's skin. The points of warmth across his back retreat as Hannibal lifts his hands to cup either side of his head and pulls Will down to press his lips to his forehead. It is his turn to be marked, Will supposes.

"You always act surprised whenever I show you affection." He ducks his chin, averting his eyes. He did not mean for it to sound so accusatory, but he cannot help the scorn that seeps into his tone like a thick oil floating across the surface of the sea. Hannibal's bottom lip curls in a ghost of a frown, the minute tightening of his jaw barely perceptible.

"When I asked you to run away with me at our last supper, I did not believe my feelings were reciprocated. I had hoped, initially, when we dined together on what I thought was Freddie Lounds, that you might have, but after I unraveled the depths of your betrayal, I wrote it off as another part of the plan, another cog in a well-oiled machine. To know now that it was real. . ." he trails off, breathing deep enough that Will feels his chest rising beneath him, "I have to convince myself I am not merely dreaming. It is not often our imago is realized."

"I'm not leaving you, Hannibal. Not now, after everything." Even if it were not for his empathy, Will understands. He spent months walking on eggshells, retreating into his workshop out of fear of whatever it was that they shared. After his relapse and escaping America for a second time, he realized that they could have each other. "I would not have brought you here only to rip the scales from your eyes and watch you drown." Hannibal shifts beneath him, almost in a shiver, and Will encompasses them with the quilt. The turn of the season is approaching. Soon it will be too cold to lay around like this.

"I know that now, in theory, only I find the tendrils of my mind clinging onto the past. I am curious how it would have been different if I had known earlier," Hannibal muses, fingertips tracing the edges of Will's almost-faded scar. The white line is barely visible, but the different texture is obvious to anyone who knows where to guide their hand. Hannibal is more than familiar with the motions.

"How would you have killed Abigail?" Will finds himself asking. The answer will be painful, he knows, but he finds himself craving the answer all the same. Hannibal regards him with suspicion, eventually leaning his head back into the pillows.

"I would have cut her throat, just like her father," he admits.

"You would have done what he was unable to do, and what she was unable to do." The conversation has turned, not sour but the warmth of it has leached away. When Will shivers, he is unsure if it is from the cold.

"Yes. It was to be my forgiveness." Hannibal untangles his hand from beneath the sheets and tucks an errant curl behind his ear. "Forgiving you for your betrayal. I have come to think that forgiveness takes two."

"The betrayer and the betrayed," supplies Will. "Which one are you?"

“I am vague on those details.” He tilts his head away, eyes searching for something outside the dark window. “Do you think it is something we can ever hope to have?”

“Forgiveness?” Will asks. “I’ve forgiven you. I forgave you when I called you from the woods outside my house in Wolf Trap. I forgave you when I killed Abigail and chose to run away with you. I forgave you when I ran away with you again after my recovery. Living with you, like this, necessitates forgiveness as a constant.”

“Mended teacups require a gentle hand, more care, or else they will break anew.”

“You haven’t forgiven me as you forgave Mischa.” The statement is blunt and has the desired effect. Hannibal stills, the only perceptible movement, his heartbeat against Will’s chest. Hannibal’s forgiveness has always been bathed in blood, and they both know it. “Do you intend to hold the same pattern?”

“A surgeon will sometimes open a patient and find the tumor inoperable, the oncogenic tissue so deeply intertwined with critical blood vessels and nerves that excision would stifle the host as well. We are a zero-sum game, Will.”

The late autumnal sun sets early, strokes of orange and yellow long gone from the horizon. Trees seem to loom over them as the pair descend the unkempt path to the front of the estate. Will convinced Hannibal to join him on a walk. Enjoy the fresh air, he said. They both know the walk is obfuscation, but Hannibal matches his stride all the same. Chiyoh’s cottage glimmers in the distance, a faint glow illuminating the windowsills. It reminds him of a ship on the sea.

“Do you miss your house, Will?” Hannibal asks, the crunch of leaves under their shoes resounding through the piercing quiet. Soon the leaves will make way for flurries of snow.

“Yes and no,” he ponders aloud. “I loved the quiet of it, but we had that in Italy. I miss my dogs. I also miss our orchard.” He shrugs his shoulders. “It’s one of those things that is in the past. I know we can’t go back.”

“Would you want to go back?” Hannibal’s pace has quickened, and Will stumbles as he tries to keep up.

“It doesn’t matter because I know I can’t. Never really dwelled on it.” He frowns. “Why does it matter?”

“Just curious.”

“You’re never just curious about anything, Hannibal,” Will accuses. They have reached the clearing, the ground leveling out beneath them. He traces Hannibal’s gaze to the pail of cleaning supplies left abandoned in the middle of the path. Hannibal does not answer, so Will

takes his hand, squeezing it in support. The pressure is returned, and the hint of a smile passes across Will's lips. He is grateful for the scarf he tucked into the collar of his coat, the light wind biting at his cheeks, leaving a rosy color in its wake. Hannibal is not visually affected by the cold, but then again, he never appeared so in Baltimore either. He tugs the man toward the pail, snapping him out of whatever contemplations haunt his mind. Hannibal closes his eyes, breathes in the distinct scent of fir trees, and follows, albeit at a languid pace. Will picks up the contents by the handle and keeps walking until they reach the enclosure, feet firmly planted at the boundary.

Moss covers the age-darkened stone, shrubbery and tall grasses crowding the liminal space between each headstone, each unique in its own way. A lone bird of paradise grows behind a single headstone. It does not take a profiler to guess whose it is. To Will's surprise, Hannibal crosses the invisible line first, dragging him into the thicket of leaves and branches. His heart rate quickens, if not in fear, then in anticipation. Each footfall a sickening crunch as time dilates and he becomes suspended in his physical form unable to move but forced to watch the events before him proceed.

"Bird of paradise. *Strelitzia.* A symbol of closeness to God and detachment from the world." Hannibal's voice travels through the air like honey, yet Will can only watch as he extends his hand to run his fingers over the flower. Something flickers across his eyes, the pools of amber darkening to a burnt red hue. He steps back as if burned, turning his face away from Will and letting go of his hand. The lapse in contact pulls him from his stupor, and he steps closer to Hannibal before hesitating.

"I'm going to get some water." The metal pail clinks when he removes its contents, much lighter now that it is empty. He pretends not to see Hannibal falling to his knees as he turns away.

The well is old, rusted, and it takes a substantial effort to get water to flow through the spout, but the water appears clean and fresh. Perhaps Chiyoh had been using it at some point. Warm water would be the most effective. The mountainous chill of the well water will have to do.

"And what have we here?" A voice cuts through the air, and Will turns around to find himself face-to-face with Chiyoh.

"Well water?" he hazards. At her pointed look, he elaborates. "I brought him to see her." The flicker of surprise is almost immediately replaced by indifference, but he saw it nonetheless.

"And so you come to fetch water, leaving Hannibal to fend off his monsters by himself." Chiyoh's tone is accusatory. Her face tells a different story, features a picture of aloof detachment.

"Neither of us are stranger to that."

“No, I suppose not.” He picks up the bucket, watching it sway with the sudden movement.

“I’m not sorry, and I would do it again,” he says, finally meeting her eyes. No hint of surprise distorts her expression.

“You were curious what would happen. What I would do.” The rifle is absent from her ensemble today, although she still carries an air of danger about her. Perhaps it is infectious.

“Yes.”

“You and Hannibal are more alike than I thought. I wonder what story your tragedy finds itself in.” At that Chiyoh smiles, the ghost of mirth on her sallow cheeks not quite reaching her eyes. Will tips his head in acknowledgement and passes her as he retraces his steps to the small graveyard.

If Hannibal notices his return, he ignores it. Words foreign to Will’s mind resound from his lips, Adam's apple bobbing against them like cotton lodged in his throat. Will deposits the bucket beside the tombstone, also kneeling at the foot of her grave. He places his hand on Hannibal’s shoulder, feeling his warmth through the thick fabric. Hannibal covers the hand with his own. The string of words stops, and they both stare at the overgrowth of moss and streaks of ash. *Mischa Lecter, Mylima.*

“Mylima,” Will attempts, trying to copy the intonations and accent he has heard from Hannibal countless times. He is certain his effort is sub-par, but Hannibal squeezes his hand regardless.

“Beloved,” he breathes. “I was telling her about you, Will. You are my family, both of you.” The tear that drips down Will’s cheek is unexpected. He lets it fall all the same, savoring the trail it leaves in its wake. “I wish you could have met her.”

“So do I.” Careful not to disturb Hannibal, Will shifts to his feet and palms the shears. The overgrown brush is thick, but the blades are sharp and part the stalks easily enough. He feels Hannibal watching him, gaze boring into the back of his skull, and he smiles as he places the water and plastic scraper before him.

So often their time together is spent speaking about anything and everything, but the silence is never unwelcome. The act of existing in the same space, their individual spheres joined into one, is equally tantalizing. The trickle of water accompanies the light scraping of plastic against stone, and Will cannot help but reminisce on the last time they did this together, only this time it is real. No specters haunt the periphery of his mind.

“You mentioned the Day of the Dead.” An idea forms in the back of his mind, color pooling into a growing picture.

“Visų šventųjų diena and Vėlinės, also known in English as All Saints Day and All Souls Day. Lithuania is a predominantly Catholic country.” Hannibal smiles sadly, eyes flickering to Will as he focuses on scraping the moss away. “Mischa was captivated by it all. I wish to properly commemorate her. It is what she would have wanted.”

“What can we do?” The crawling shrubbery is almost cut away and Will discards the cut stems to the side for the time being.

“Candles, flowers, food. It is an honoring of the dead. The traditions of a pagan holiday merged with Catholic celebrations.”

“Then we should do that, if you want.” The explanation for what he wants to ask evades him, and he remains silent instead. Hannibal nods, hands steady as he dips the brushes in the water.

“What is it?” he asks, seeing through Will’s silence like a sheet of glass. There is clearly something left unanswered that you have halted at the tip of your tongue. Spit it out or swallow it. Don’t allow it to fester.” Will sighs, the dilemma still caught in his throat.

“How long are we staying? It’s only going to get colder and. . .” he leaves the remainder left unsaid. The implication hangs in the air regardless. *Will you survive the winter here? Is it your cross to bear?*

“You wish to marry *here.”* Trust Hannibal to somehow read between the lines, even when the lines are tightly knit together. Will discards the shears, averting his full attention to the man before him.

“As I said, there is no one left for either of us. Mischa is here. Chiyoh is here if she will still have me. I do not see where else would be better.” Hannibal nods, tilting his head to the side. His eyes gleam despite the darkness.

“On Vėlinės, after midnight when the moon is high. I never believed in ghosts, but she did. You wanted it to be soon.” They hold each other’s gaze for a moment longer before Hannibal turns back to scrubbing at the half-clean tombstone.

“I do.”

The afternoon fades into evening, the darkness somehow becoming blacker, more consuming. Hannibal entertains him with stories from his childhood, memories that seem to tumble from his tongue like raindrops in the Spring. Dim lantern light casts shadows on their faces, rippling across skin as if it was water. Fireflies join their revelry, unaware of how their whispers of light flit about and extinguish.

Hannibal scents the air, shoulders still as he turns without a sound. Will traces his movement to a lone figure approaching in the dark. The glint of Chiyoh’s coat buttons contrasts against the tree line in the dim glow of the lantern, a freshly-picked handful of primrose tucked into the crook of her arm.

“Will you stay?” Hannibal asks, gesturing for her to sit if she wishes. Chiyoh registers the double meaning. He asks not only if she will stay right now, but if she will stay here, in Lithuania.

“No more than you can,” she answers as she lowers herself to the ground, the grace of her former position evident. “I had not believed you would come back, not here.” A slight crinkling of lines around Hannibal’s eyes.

“It is our childhood that influences our present and future. The framework of how our perceptions are understood. Our perceptions are alike in some ways, different in others.” His eyes flicker to the bruising peeking out from under her collar, the culprit of which she erased from the world.

“Your perceptions are alike in many ways,” she gestures to Will, eyeing him as she continues. “You are both charming the way a cub is charming, a small cub that grows up to be like one of the big cats.”

“Does it make your heart race?” Will asks, quirking an eyebrow. At this, the corner of Hannibal’s mouth tilts up in a grin.

“A hummingbird’s heart beats faster than can be clearly heard by the human ear. They spend their breaths quickly; the price of freedom of flight,” he muses, eyes drifting between the two seated before him.

“I see the best of you and the worst with steady hands and a slow heart,” she pauses, “I came to say goodbye to Mischa.” Chiyoh passes the bouquet to Hannibal, dipping her head in the direction of the polished stone. As she gathers her bearings to rise, Will catches the side of her sleeve.

“Will you stay long enough. . .” he clears his throat, “long enough to come to our wedding?” Chiyoh looks at him, then Hannibal, expression curious but otherwise blank. He says a few phrases in what Will presumes to be Japanese, and her expression softens.

“I will stay,” she announces, glancing between Hannibal and Will as she rises and disappears into the night.

The lantern light fades out into the distance, disappearing into the bramble of trees and leaving a single dancing candle flame illuminating a bouquet of fresh primroses.

The chill is insidious and seeps in through the few shattered windows, no raging fireplaces to banish it away. Will reclines on a chaise, nursing a glass–in this case, a mug–of whiskey, his legs laid across his lover’s lap. Hannibal hums, thumbing gentle strokes over the exposed flesh of his ankle, his own still half-full whiskey resting on the side table. He welcomes the burn of the liquor sliding down his throat, enjoying the warmth that spreads through his

limbs. The meager amount is not enough to make him drunk, but his limbs are loose and relaxed. The tightly-laced threads holding his composure together begin to unravel, one stitch at a time. Hannibal grimes when Will flexes his foot as he scratches across a sensitive spot. Will giggles at the Cheshire smirk inching across his face.

He thinks about how little Hannibal used to smile when they first knew each other, all interactions with him graced with a twitch of his mouth, everyone else with a mere tightening of lips. That polite facade is now cast aside in favor of honesty. Hannibal is unafraid to show his teeth, yet Will is certain he will never find them embedded in his flesh. His smiles are genuine, playful things that light up the shadows instead of hiding in them. He laughs now, Will realizes. It is rare, still, but he cannot recall a time in their past that held as much mirth.

The introspection only serves to remind him of the fragility of what they share. One misstep and it could all be over. Skirting the edges of the law, flirting with death, the expiration dates of their lives are accelerated. Will never considered old age. He thought that if he ever made it that far, he would retire in his house with his dogs, probably die by himself, his corpse rotting away till who knows when. He supposes it does not have to be different now, except now he has Hannibal. Hannibal, who lived day by day, only ever enjoying the present. He has not, but Will knows that he would never receive a straight answer on the topic because there is not and never was one. Hannibal was not one to seek out self-destruction. His lifetime evasion of consequences was born not of self-preservation but of pride. Were it to come, Hannibal would welcome death like one welcomes the prospect of mail on a Monday morning.

Will discards his drink on the side table by its twin, the chipped ceramic clinking together with a dull twang. He flips his orientation so his feet dangle off the edge of the lounge and his head rests in Hannibal's lap. The man huffs, pleasure coloring the tops of his cheekbones as he presses his dexterous fingers into Will's scalp. He rubs rhythmic circles into the crown of his head, sighing when he feels shivers travel down Will's spine.

"Shall we talk about teacups and time and the rules of disorder?" Hannibal's voice is soft, but it carries all the same, a lighthouse on a dark sea.

"Our teacup is whole. We remade it," Will responds, head turned away so Hannibal cannot see his face, "I'm just not sure how long we can keep it from falling apart."

"Our fears are clouds that form from the condensation of our earliest experiences. Tell me, Will, is it the teacup itself you fear breaking, or rather the inescapable force of gravity?"

"Is there no table to lay the teacup on that will work against gravity?" Will asks.

"There could be, yet one must be wary of clumsy hands." As if to demonstrate the point, Hannibal dips his hand to Will's neck and scratches at the baby hairs.

"The precariousness excites you," he realizes. Hannibal does not deny it and instead continues digging into the tender spots of his skull. "You'd rather shatter on the floor having seen the edge of the cliff than never experience either." Again, he receives no acknowledgement, but Hannibal strokes the sensitive spot behind his ears in silent affirmation.

“Would you rather live in darkness, Will?” he asks, no judgment, only curiosity in his voice.

“No,” Will replies, “but that doesn’t mean I’m not afraid of falling.”

“Fear is the price of your imagination. No horrors of the outside world can overcome what has already been conquered by your mind.”

“Hence all the forts,” he chuckles, tracing the knit pattern of Hannibal’s slacks.

“Hiding away in the bone area of your skull was never becoming of you, beloved. Who would witness the brilliance you hold behind your eyes?” Hannibal obviously considers the matter closed, but Will’s worries are not so easily assuaged. He drops the topic for now, however, as if they are already speaking in metaphors, it does not bode well for transparency. Something nags at him still, tugs at the frayed edges of his mind.

“One must be wary of who they share their light with.”

The morning temperature does not offer respite. Will finds himself wearing layers even inside. Hannibal pretends to be unbothered, but the woolen scarf peeking out from under his sweater says otherwise. Their efforts with the pickles need to be left alone for some time, so Hannibal makes do with the fresh food available, something Will has no complaints about. Searing mugs of tea warm their fingers, joints crinkling as he flexes the sleep out of them.

Hannibal asked him to join him on a trip to the market, something Will was hesitant to agree to, given the higher likelihood that someone would recognize them together. Their tentative agreement solidifies as Will begins to formulate an itinerary of his own. If he notices it, Hannibal fails to mention the burner phone he slips into his pocket.

The leaves that litter the ground are different from Italy, different from Virginia. A deep-rooted melancholy seeps out of each fiber, leaching copper blood written into genetic code decades ago. The sound of bones crackling under a heavy boot.

Will lets go of Hannibal’s hand when they leave the property line, earning a huff of annoyance from Hannibal. He does not protest further, however. Two strange men, one obviously American, the other obviously not, draw enough attention as it is. No need for additional stares.

The wind carries them to the door of civilization like dispersed dandelions. To his surprise, Hannibal blends in with the crowd more than he expected, high cheekbones and sunken eyes not out of place among similar features. He appears so. . . human, his worn brown overcoat and scarf creating a portrayal of a softer, older man well into his middle age. His smile lines are deeper, Will notices and smiles at the realization himself. During his reminiscing, he misses Hannibal striking a conversation with a vendor, the foreign syllables flying off his tongue with little hesitation.

“Ah and this must be your brother-in-law?” she asks, turning her head in his direction as she switches to English.

“Huh–oh, yeah,” Will stammers. “I’m Jack.” Mentally punching himself in the face, he turns to catch a flicker of a smirk cross Hannibal’s face. “Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” she smiles. Her fingers make swift work of knotting the bags of produce which Hannibal places into his bag. “How do you like Aukštaitija so far?”

“It’s nice,” he nods, not wanting to divulge any details about their whereabouts. “Cold, too.”

“Just wait until December,” she huffs, her genuine smile offsetting the rebuke. She shares a look with Hannibal as if to say, “poor American does not know what he’s got himself into.” Hannibal smiles, but it is one of his fake ones. It’s too superficial, as if Will could lift it with the blunt end of a butter knife. Hannibal’s lower lip twitches, and he wonders what else lurks in the corners of his mind. The places where the draft is the strongest and the warmth of the fire does not reach.

The nagging sensation at the corners of Will’s mind persists. For once choosing to consciously obey his inner instincts, he tells Hannibal he will be back soon. The older man cocks his head, eyebrows raised in silent question, but Will only smirks and cocks his head in return.

“I’m sure you’ll find me,” he promises before ducking away to follow the rows of stalls. Now that his undivided attention is directed solely on his environment, a wave of disorderly emotions overcomes him, a particularly strong swell dragging him out into the open. Only interacting with Hannibal and Chiyoh on the rare occasion for the past few days provided such a reprieve from the slurry of noise thrashing about in his head. Although he can now read Hannibal like a pocket-size book with very small letters, his emotions never overwhelm Will’s own. He can peer into the grey matter of Hannibal’s psyche, but the act is conscious if not consensual. The baptism into society is painful, albeit something he is accustomed to. Withdrawing himself, Will scours the market and filters information in search of something that has not yet taken form in his mind’s eye.

The people he meanders past pay him no attention, for which he is thankful. As much as the United States was his home for almost the entirety of his life, the false smiles and forced eye contact gnawed away at his sanity sometimes, hence his decision to live in seclusion.

On the other end of the road lies a row of small stores, little doorways huddled together as if to hide away from the cold. Things that Hannibal would insist they have no need for because he can make them himself. Dried goods, pastries, and a coffee shop.

The inside is covered in assorted light fixtures, a dim glow emanating from each bulb. It paints a hearty picture, and he notices the scent of freshly ground coffee and dried aromatic teas mingling in the air. His attempts to greet the barista in the little Lithuanian Hannibal taught him are met with a warm smile and reassurance that she speaks English. Sighing with relief, he orders coffee with cream and no sugar and in quires if they have an internet connection available. The barista concludes her pleasantries, gesturing to the bottom of the receipt.

Will thanks her and takes the cup proffered to him. He finds himself sitting in a chair in the corner of the store, far away from the window. Golden flames dance across the hearth of a small fireplace, and he considers how their journey here might have been a pleasant vacation, in another life. Sipping on the bitter creaminess of the coffee, he imagines a guest room in a parent's 70s-style home, shared jokes around a packed dinner table. It's tantalizing. It's suffocating.

The web address for Tattle Crime dances across his fingers, the burner phone drawn out of hiding. The bright circle of slow connection death taunts him before the creaking of the old wooden door garners his attention. Hannibal's gaze spears him summarily, and any signals from Will's cortices are interrupted before they reach his legs. Unceremoniously shoving the phone in his pocket, he waves to him. Why he falls into the familiar embrace of dishonesty, he cannot say.

"Are you unsatisfied with our supply of coffee?" Hannibal quips, and only now does Will notice the dampness of his hair and splotches of moisture on his coat. "It's beginning to rain, and we have a walk back," he finishes instead, subtly conveying that he is dropping the subject, for now.

"Yeah," Will replies for lack of anything better to say. He smiles at the barista as he leaves, and she returns it. A chill runs down his spine as the door clicks behind them, the cold seeping deeper than any winter ice. Hannibal's hands are occupied with the day's groceries, so he relieves him of half of them, gripping onto his hand like the man will melt away in the rain. Of course, Hannibal does not protest, merely returning the pressure with equal force.

The landscape of his dreams was never a haven, yet today Will does not dream at all. His limbs float in a pool of nothing, dark matter absorbing all light until there is nothing, nothing, only the feeling of contentment. His skin tingles with the encompassing warmth, a solid pressure against him keeping the errant ghosts at bay. Suddenly, hands pull him out of the water. They grasp at him like a piece of driftwood amidst a shipwreck.

As he returns to the conscious world, the multitudes of hands disappear until a single pair remains. He finds his cheek pressed firmly into the pillow, Hannibal almost entirely draped over him. His chin rests above Will's shoulder, forehead nestled into the nape of his neck. The strength with which he holds him conceals most of the shivers running through his arms. Will wonders if dried tears cling to his eyes.

"Hannibal," he whispers into his skin. "It's okay. You're alright." Eyes flecked with crimson gape, something akin to dismay flickering behind shuttered windows. Hannibal scurries off of him in only a definition of the word Hannibal can achieve. He averts his eyes, shoulders still shuddering.

"Did I. . . do anything to you, Will?" His tone is almost pleading, and Will knits his brows together.

“No, of course not,” he reassures. “Are you okay? You’re shaking.” Hannibal looks down at his hands, in need of visual confirmation. He clasps them together, resting them in his lap as if to restrain himself.

“It’s cold,” he offers in explanation. Now that Hannibal is no longer pressed against him, the chill of the room seeps into the crevices of his skin. The rain dissipated in the late evening, and the temperature has only plummeted since. Webs of condensation line the windows, the panes blocks of ice among the wooden frames.

Will throws the covers back, planting his feet on the frigid tile floor. At Hannibal’s stifled whimper, he treads quickly to the closet. The dusty quilts still line the higher shelves, but with a thorough shaking, he managed to revive one enough. Hannibal grimaces at the quilt, lips curling in mild disgust. Will tucks it over their covers, making sure the clean sheets will be what they touch directly. Laying back on the covers, he opens his arms. After a moment’s hesitation, Hannibal collapses into his embrace, arms crushing them together until only the laws of physics keep them as separate entities. He whispers Will’s name into the tender skin of his neck like a prayer. *Will. Will. Will. Will. Will.* A steady heartbeat. *I have you,* Will thinks. *Always and forever.*

The fires burning in the canopy of the night sky fade away with the break of dawn. Throughout the night, the awareness of holding Hannibal and being held in return was present, a resounding chorus in the back of his mind. As night slips away, so does Will’s consciousness. He wakes alone in a half-empty bed, sheets tucked tight around him. Dressing for the day, the songbirds accompany his efforts, an errant crow breaking the reverie.

He follows the corridor to the room with the low bed, to what end he is unsure. It is there that he finds Hannibal, pages and pages of his writing strewn about the floor. Back pressed to the wall, his unstyled fringe falls across his forehead, deceptively soft. Will sits beside him, legs crossed so their knees touch.

Where there were bookshelves now stand gilded arches. Geometric patterns on a marble floor peek out from between the scattered pages. Golden flames engulf the iconography; crowns of fire replace thorns. A bleached skull, engraved in the floor, leers at him, jaw stretched open in a never-ending mockery. Hannibal stands beside him, extinguishing a single candle with his fingers, the oxygen-starved flame giving out with a hiss. A tendril of smoke billows outward until it dissipates into nothing.

Chaos. The laws of disorder and entropy. Constant.

Hannibal turns to face the anterior of the chapel, eyes tracing along the stairs leading up to the dais. His cheekbones cut slivers of shadows, eyes shrouded in darkness behind his brow. A sanguine glint betrays them.

“For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow.”

Hannibal turns back to him, the shadows now spreading like a thick oil on the surface of turbulent water. Bells ring in the distance, their din amplifying with each round. Not a funeral dirge, no.

A wedding.

Ebony horns sprout from the crown of his head, parting strands of hair. The sharp tips gleam in the candlelight. Tar-stained wings unfurl over his shoulders. Drenched in darkness, Hannibal stands taller, head tilted up to the heavens as inky tears escape down the sides of his cheeks, leaving roads of sorrow in their wake.

Will crosses the rows of pews, footfalls drowned out by the unrelenting ringing of bells. When his feet meet the first step, he looks back, and the apparition is gone, the papers strewn about the only evidence anyone was ever there. The bells stop, the dichotomy of their absence more notable than their presence. A rustling of feathers, and then, Hannibal, standing on the dais before him. Only the sound of watery dripping, inky darkness collecting on the marble until it runs down the stairs. Will averts his eyes, almost in shame. The darkness consumes all available light, dimming the flames until they glow more than dance. Hannibal tilts Will's chin up, fingers smearing ink over his mouth. Will finally meets his eyes and notes the embers among a sea of dark matter, the flames of lost stars burning in them.

"When the stars threw down their spears, and water'd heaven with their tears, did he smile his work to see?" Hannibal's voice reverberates through the chapel and Will feels the words singing through his veins. "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?"

A single tear crests on Will's cheek, and he brings his fingers to the high point, ghosting across skin until he finds the tips of his fingers stained black. He runs them across Hannibal's face, the defined tracks now smudged. New tears fall to replace those lost, and he reaches to cup Will's face with both hands, kissing his forehead. The mark stings.

"The Romans hardly believed Greek medical writing to be sacrosanct," Hannibal begins. "They believed Greek writings to be against the better interests of Roman citizens, and many transcripts were lost. I endeavored to record everything I could." He touches Will's forehead, fingers dragging over the throbbing mark that feels etched into his skin.

"Your journals," he voices, stating the obvious. "A facsimile of the elegant web of words of those we fed to the fire or are these more honest?" Hannibal smiles, mischief written in the wrinkling of his eyes.

"And to what honesty do you hope they aspire?"

"If I could read them, would I recognize your reflection?"

Hannibal considers this for a moment and thumbs absently at the leather binds of a singular book.

"I suppose so, in one way. A part of myself exists between the lines, if you know how to look, and you do, Will. Are we anything but the sum of many parts, our being defined by everyone whose lives we have ever touched?"

"If that's the case, then do we not see each other completely? Am I lacking for not fearing the monster that some claim you to be?" he asks.

“I never considered you lacking,” Hannibal frowns. “If anything, your ability to persevere in spite of your fear, not of me but of what I might do, is one of those I admire most about you. ” He places his hand on Will’s knee, the warmth of his palm leaching through the thick material. “And you can read them, if you wish. I can translate some of it, but there are a few in English.”

“I would like that.”

There are many more in English than he would have thought, a number which is eclipsed by French and Italian. He sorts through the pages, bindings sometimes tearing and breaking under his touch so the papers slip out. He reads them tucked against Hannibal’s chest, folding his legs underneath himself. Hannibal reads silently over his shoulder, his breath the only evidence of his presence in the waking world.

Preparations for their wedding consume the majority of their waking hours. Never one for weddings, or wedding traditions, Will is surprised by how many things are being washed, dusted, and arranged. He doubts it originates from a place of tradition for Hannibal, though. The compulsions rather arise from his need to be in control. The floors he scrubs are not honored guests at the altar of their marriage, but Hannibal is nervous if one can say such a thing about the man, and this is his attempt at comfort. Of course, Will has his own ideations.

The pair often find themselves tangled together under the sheets, each attempting to meld into the other so warmth can be shared. Will enjoys seeing Hannibal so pliant, a rosy hue tinting his skin. He relishes discovering the softer spots of Hannibal’s body, what makes him sigh, how his fingers wander, attempting to clasp something in desperation. Will’s shoulders, his hair, his arms, anything within reach. He cherishes every half-moon indentation where nails dug into flesh.

Will was never someone who enjoyed cuddling. It was stifling and often oversensitized his mind with someone else’s emotions when all he wanted was to be alone inside his own head. Now, he finds himself dragging Hannibal back into bed so they can lie in each other’s arms. Head pillowed on Hannibal’s chest, he listens to the steady heartbeat, imagining the organ contracting, pumping crimson blood through his body. Here, all he feels is love. His own, as well as Hannibal’s. He cannot deny that the feeling isn’t one of drowning, yet it is drowning in everything all at once. If he stops struggling, he realizes that not only can he breathe, but that his lungs are lighter than ever.

What Will adores the most is kissing him. Whenever. However. Whether it is the quick, innocent pecks while Hannibal cooks, the delicate, reverent mingling of breaths in the quiet of the evenings, or the desperate, lustful devouring of one another where words are not exchanged, all Will wishes is for this to be forever.

As awed as he is by the scope of Hannibal’s preparations, he has a few of his own. Resizing Hannibal’s ring ends up being easier than he imagined, due to the band being pure gold. The

scale pattern fades in the back, so he cuts there and solders more gold to bridge the gap. After polishing it to match the remainder of the band, it looks as if the ring had never been touched at all. The garnets glint in the light, and he has to admit that it really is a beautiful ring.

In an effort to make amends, he writes a letter to Chiyoh. It is not a thing of eloquence, waxing poetic on how he hopes to bridge whatever pitfalls have appeared between them. More than anything, it is honest, and he thinks she will appreciate the gesture. Honesty and truthfulness are worth more than any gold, and more dangerous than any weapon if one knows how to wield them. The stationary is old, something fancier than he would ever choose for himself, but it was sitting unused in the drawer of Hannibal's old desk, no better use for it than now. Before he seals the envelope, he slips a wooden hairpin he carved among the other contents. The hundreds of ash trees across the estate were more than enough inspiration. He carved the end into the shape of a wing, hoping she will appreciate the symbolism. *No longer a caged bird.*

November first arrives, and with it, the unending cold. Hannibal becomes more clingy, holding Will in his sleep with such force that he is surprised he never wakes up with bruises. The ubiquitous quality of Hannibal's arsenal of tea becomes evident as steaming mugs are more likely to be present atop the nearest flat surface than not.

Hannibal's promises of dinner come to fruition with Chiyoh's arrival. To Will's knowledge, she has not set foot in this part of the estate recently, yet she finds her way all the same. She lets herself in, so he greets her in the kitchen where Hannibal is finishing preparations. The letter wordlessly passes from his hands to hers, Chiyoh smiling in acknowledgement as she dips her head graciously. Pale parchment disappears into the breast pocket of her coat, which she does not remove. She and Hannibal exchange greetings, the scene almost a facsimile of normality.

"Will you help me set the table, Will?" Hannibal asks, a picture of domesticity with a towel thrown over his shoulder and an apron around his hips. Will nods, already heading in the direction of the linen closet. He selects a rich burgundy cloth that matches the wine Chiyoh brought as a gift. It was set at the top of the pile, likely chosen by Hannibal in advance, although the decision still feels his somehow. He straightens it out as Hannibal appears with three sets of plates and silverware. What is left of the fine china is hardly fine, the nicer pieces long lost to greedy hands and the need for basic necessities. It still stings, albeit a little. He wishes there was more left of it, the place he was cultivated, not the bare bones of the orphanage where he became a stranger in his own home.

Arranging the last of the centerpiece, Hannibal holds onto Will's jacket sleeve and kisses him before he disappears to get dressed. Will insisted the wedding be outside, so Mischa could be there too. The beautiful suits Hannibal had made for them will not be readily visible, although ultimately the location matters more to both of them. Will is wearing his, a navy so deep it appears almost black. Faint platinum filigree lines the seams, only visible when the light hits it a certain way.

Hannibal descends the stairs, a certain majesty deserving of his title emanating from his being. To contrast Will's navy, he wears a wine-colored velvet jacket, equally so rich that it absorbs most available light. The same platinum filigree lines his collar and cuffs, his pocket square an embroidered silk mirroring the color of Will's jacket. His own velvet pocket square lies folded across his heart, the ring a heavy presence within his inner pocket.

The three of them sit at the table for dinner. Hannibal reassures Chiyoh that the main dish is really fish when she eyes him inquisitively, at which she rolls her eyes, a playful twinkle in her eye.

Candles litter Mischa's grave, each flame a devotee praying at the altar of its God. They dance across the bird of paradise, itself appearing engulfed in flames, a phoenix, reborn from its ashes. Fresh primrose adorns the plot of earth, the sea of fire parted in reverence.

Hannibal kneels at her side, eyes adrift beneath closed eyelids, his presence in the waking world a single thread. The blood red spool crosses time and space, and the other end roots itself in Will's heart. If he yanks it out, his blood will drip from it. Possibly the trickle would reach Hannibal's own heart, their blood mixing until it clots and kills them both. Will stands outside their chapel. Although brick and mortar separate him from Hannibal, he can feel his presence nonetheless. The warmth along the thread thrums with life and Will smiles, reassured by it.

Chiyoh stands beside him, her leather boots soundless against the frost-ridden ground. A phantom in her own right, she merely exists, watching as the vapor of their breaths mingles in the night.

"Why after midnight?" she finally asks. Will hums, pleased.

"Moonlight," he answers. That, among other things. The significance of moonlight throughout their relationship was always prevalent. He told Chilton to deny the shadows to Hannibal, to force him out of hiding. Instead, he found himself prowling in the darkness alongside him. All judgements of the natural order are tossed away in favor of man-made sin. The warmth of manufactured flames bites and feeds, an all-consuming force. To the devil his due.

"Hecate, goddess of witchcraft." Chiyoh's brows furrow in contemplation. "Is this a crossroads?"

"One could say it is an act of departing from one life to the next."

"What of Cerberus?"

"I have yet to encounter a beast I cannot tame, and he has yet to encounter one he cannot slay." He nods in Hannibal's direction, the man's eyes still closed in a perfect portrayal of

peace.

Leaving Chiyoh to her own ideations, he opens the doors to their chapel, feet carrying him to the confessional. He kneels beside Hannibal, fingers intertwining. The thread pulses against his heart. Hannibal lays his hand across his breast, covering the origin of the thread. Will feels the weight of it in his chest, the familiar warmth of Hannibal's fingers a welcome paddle in an empty sea.

For the first time, he speaks directly to Mischa. He tells her about Hannibal, about how much he loves her. He wonders if she would tease him as younger sisters do. He tells her how although he never knew her, she sometimes wanders over into his mind across the bridge between his and Hannibal's psyche. He pleads for her to be careful, to not slip into the river and join the corpses that follow the current. He thanks her for seeing the light in Hannibal's soul, for cultivating it and allowing it to grow, even if it was forced to sleep for decades. He thanks her for loving Hannibal, as he deserves to be loved.

The grip on his hand tightens, and when he raises his eyes to Hannibal's he finds them glassy.

"She would have adored you, Will," he says, voice rumbling with emotion. His adam's apple bobs as he swallows thickly. Will squeezes his hand back, signifying he understands, even if he does not know how to articulate it.

The tolling of church bells interrupts their reverie, a child's laughter echoing throughout the cacophony. Chiyoh stands at the head of the pews, her hair adorned with a crown of stars. A distant inferno blazes behind her eyes, seemingly light years away, yet her countenance betrays a mirth he has never witnessed in her. Perched on her left shoulder, a raven, dark as the night sky above them, watches, feathers glistening. She extends her hand, her sleeve a midnight black coated in flecks of silver, two packages tied with twine lying in the palm of her hand.

"There are means of influence other than violence," she says. Hannibal takes them and kisses her cheek. Will smiles, nodding in gratitude. The ringing of the bells dies away as they step onto the altar. Such a silence spreads, like the quiet in the eye of a storm. Hannibal stands before him, their hands clasped together. The inky tears have washed away, revealing an aura of light about him. He smiles, the crow's feet around his eyes more prominent than ever, and it pulses, ever brighter until the light of the candles is put to shame.

Who is he to stand before him, witness to a love that permeates his every being? He, who was to be Delilah, cut his own hair instead, and penned his love in blood to Lucifer himself. Were Cerberus to grant him leave, he would not go. His fate is sealed, here, among the sanguine glint in Hannibal's eyes, the twitch of his plush lips. *He who holds the devil, may he hold him well.*

A lantern, held up by Chiyoh. The frosted glass refracts the light, shadows filtering over their faces in the midst of their union. It provides a harshness to their features, sharp cheekbones and crooked noses cut across by fragments of shadow. She is less an officiant and more a guiding force, a witness of their memory. They already belong to one another, body, spirit, and mind, yet the vows were important, necessary. Promises sealed with flesh, secrets sworn

to keep. The last of Bluebeard's wives, but no sacrifice is ever only one's to make. *Let me fall atop your grave and may the earth bury me beside you.*

"I promise you sight," Hannibal begins, voice unwavering, purposeful. His eyes are locked on Will's, peering into the very depths of his soul. "To see me, as I am in every capacity, and to witness you, however you wish to share with me. I promise you candor. To never allow the poison of mistruths and equivocation to darken our waters. I promise you my love. To remind you of the fire in your eyes that brings me to my knees before you, the goodness in your heart that I cannot help but be moved by. Years ago, I swore to myself I would not allow you to change me, yet here I stand, flayed open at the altar of your worship. I am yours, for longer than the covenant of flesh will keep, for no death will part me from you." The tears flow openly from his eyes now, their golden ichor staining his cheeks as they descend. Will is equally moved and takes a moment to compose himself, finding his voice broken despite his efforts. Tears coat his vocal chords, sound wavering in the air before it escapes his lips.

"I promise to give equally as I receive. I took so much from you and you from me. Let it be willingly. I promise to live for you, to enjoy every waking moment we share and savor it. I promise you myself, in every world we witness. I will not allow our separation, for we are conjoined along every sphere. I promise to love you, openly, unabashedly, as you deserve to be cherished and adored. One might say your worship is sharp, and if it is, then I will cut upon it my hand and feed you my lifeblood. Together, in this world and the next."

Hannibal averts his gaze, seeking instead Will's hand as he slides the ring onto his finger, an action which Will reciprocates a moment later. He marvels at the weight of the metal against his skin as he pushes its twin past his knuckle. Hannibal looks at him then, a fresh river carved into the hollows of his eyes. He wipes them away, ichor coating his fingers as he pulls Hannibal to him. The meeting of their lips tastes of salt, a soft drowning in one another. Hannibal's hand tangles in his hair, the other caressing Will's back. Will sobs into his mouth, overwhelmed by the heady taste of him on his tongue, the warmth of his body pressed against his. Hannibal only holds him tighter. The corner of his lip catches on sharp teeth, and Hannibal pulls away, thumb pressed to his chin as he inspects the damage. A plume of crimson gathers, lying in wait for gravity to pull it over the edge. Hannibal dips his head, presses his lips to the wound, and sucks, a blossoming of pain and pleasure radiating from the epicenter of it. Will growls. It rumbles low in his chest as he takes Hannibal's lip between his teeth and splits it, tasting him in the same manner. His pupils dilate even more despite the darkness of the late night, and Will understands, he knows because he feels the same. Reciprocity for their mutual benefit.

"Husband. You're my husband," Will says with glee.

"As you are mine," the mirth is returned with equal force. "Will Lecter."

The cawing of a raven echoes throughout the hall.

Chapter End Notes

They're married!!

Some of the text in here is from the bible, and some of it is from the poem "Tyger" by William Blake.

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